Piebald Dog Running Along the Shore

by

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TO VLADIMIR SANGI

In the impenetrable maritime night, filled with flying spume and cold wind, all along the shore of the Sea of Okhotsk, all along the battlefront of land and sea, the everlasting, implacable opposition of two elements was being fought out: the land Was obstructing the movement of the sea, and the sea never wearied of assailing the land.

The sea boomed and heaved in the dark, charging forward and dashing itself on the crags. The rock-hard earth groaned as it beat off these onslaughts by the sea.

They have been duelling like this ever since Creation--since the time when day first became day and night first became night, and so it shall be, all days and all nights, as long as earth and water abide in unending time.

All days and all nights...

Yet another night was passing. The night before putting out to sea. For the first time in his life he could not sleep; for the first time in his life he had insomnia. He very much wanted day to come sooner so that he

could rush out to sea. As he lay on his sealskin, he could feel the almost imperceptible trembling of the ground under him at the blows of the sea, and he could hear the waves booming and tossing in the bay. He could not sleep, and he listened intently to the night...

Once upon a time, it had all been different. Nowadays, it was impossible even to imagine such a thing, no one knew about it, no one even guessed that had it not been for Luvr the Duck in those remote times, the world might have been arranged quite differently--the land would not have opposed the water and the water would not have opposed the land. In the beginning, the beginning of all beginnings, there was no land in nature, not even a grain of sand. There was water everywhere, nothing but water. The water came into being out of itself, in black abysses, in unfathomable deeps. And waves rolled over waves, flowing in all directions over a world that was without direction, out of nowhere into nowhere.

But Luvr the Duck, yes, that same commonplace broadbilled bird that sweeps over our heads in flocks to this very day, was flying at that time over the world all alone, and she had nowhere to lay an egg. There was nothing in the whole world but water, there weren't even any reeds with which to build a nest.

Luvr the Duck cried out incessantly, as she flew, for she was afraid that she wouldn't be able to hold out, she was afraid that she would drop the egg into the fathomless deeps. And wherever Luvr the Duck flew, wherever she went, the waves splashed below her, the Great Water spread all round, without shores, without beginning, without end. And Luvr the Duck was drained of all her strength; she was sure that there was nowhere in the whole world where she could build a nest.

Then Luvr the Duck settled on the water, plucked the feathers from her breast and made her nest. And it was from that floating nest that the land began to form. Little by little the land spread outwards, little by little the earth was settled by all kinds of creatures.

But man surpassed them all; he learned how to walk on the snow on skis and to sail on the water in a boat. He began hunting game, he began catching fish, and with them he fed himself and multiplied his tribe.

If only Luvr the Duck had known how hard life would become when land appeared in the boundless domains of the water. Ever since land came into being, the sea has been unable to calm itself; ever since then, the sea has battled with the land and the land has battled with the sea. And man sometimes finds himself being crushed between them, between land and sea, between sea and land. The sea hates him for being more attached to the land...

Morning was drawing near. One more night was departing, another day was being born. In the brightening grey twilight, the raging conflict of sea and land was gradually acquiring more distinct outlines, like a reindeer's lip in a silvery cloud of breath. The sea was breathing. The cold steam of the flying spray billowed along the whole boiling battlefront of land and sea, and the stubborn booming of the surf hung in the air all the way along the coast.

The waves pressed on: wave after wave swept irresistibly upwards to storm the land over a cold, harsh layer of sand, upwards through the brown, slippery piles of rocks, upwards, as long as energy and impetus sufficed, and then wave after wave subsided, like a sigh, on the last line of the wash, leaving a short-lived fringe of foam and the odour of rotting, churned-up seaweed.

Fragments of ice-floes were sometimes cast up on to the beach with the surf; they had been carried from no one knew where by the springtime ocean currents. Sportive ice-floes, thrown up on to the sand turned at once into ugly, helpless chunks of frozen sea. The next waves quickly carried them back into their element.

The gloom vanished. The morning was becoming more and more flooded with light. Gradually, the outlines of the land became distinguishable; gradually, the sea became clearer.

The waves, agitated by the night wind, were still boiling near the shore in their invading white-topped ranks, but in the vanishing distance, the sea was already being pacified, glittering with a leaden lustre.

Clouds crawled in from the sea, moving nearer to the hills overlooking the shore.

At this spot, near Piebald Dog Bay, on a hilly peninsula that entered the sea at an angle, there was a conspicuous mountain that was indeed reminiscent from a distance of an enormous piebald dog running on affairs of its own along the seashore. Its flanks covered with bushes, it retained until the full heat of summer a white patch of snow on its head, like a big dangling ear, and an even bigger white patch in the groin of a shaded hollow. Piebald Dog Mountain could be seen far and wide, both from the sea and from the forest.

A *Nivkh* kayak put out to sea from Piebald Dog Bay in the morning, when the sun had risen to the height of two poplars. There were three hunters in the boat and, with them, a young boy. The two younger and stronger of the men were rowing with two pairs of oars. In the stem, at the helm, sat the oldest of them, gravely sucking at a wooden pipe, brown-faced, lean, with a prominent Adam's apple. His face was very wrinkled, as was his neck, which was criss-crossed with deep folds. His hands were big, gnarled and covered with scars and cracks. His hair was grey, almost white. The grey eyebrows were prominent on the brown face. As of habit, the old man had screwed up his rheumy, reddened eyes against the sun. He had, after all, spent his whole life staring at the watery expanse that reflected the sun's rays, and he seemed to be steering the boat blind across the bay. At the other end of the kayak, a dark-eyed youngster of eleven or twelve was perched like a snipe on the prow, now and again glancing at the grown-ups and keeping himself still with great difficulty so as not to fidget too much and provoke the displeasure of the gloomy old man.

The boy was excited. His quivering nostrils were

dilated and the hidden freckles had appeared on his face. He had inherited them from his mother; when she was very happy, similar freckles appeared on her face. The boy had something to be thrilled about. This sea-trip was for his benefit; it was his initiation into the hunter's life. And so Kirisk was twisting round his head in all directions like a snipe, looking everywhere with unflagging interest and impatience. For the first time in his life, Kirisk was bound for the open sea in the big family kayak with real hunters after real big game. He was eager to get up and egg the oarsmen on; he very much wanted to take over the oars himself and bend to them with all his might in order to get as quickly as possible to the islands where there was to be a big hunt for sea beasts. But to serious people, such childish desires could only seem amusing. Afraid of this, he tried with all his might not to give himself away. But he didn't quite succeed. It was hard for him to hide his happiness--a hot flush stood out distinctly on the swarthy, firm cheeks. Above all, his eyes, beaming, clear, the inspired eyes of a boy, could not conceal the joy and pride that filled his exultant soul to overflowing. Ahead was the sea, ahead was the big-game hunt!

Old Organ understood him. As he watched the boat's course across the sea, he also noticed that the boy was fidgeting with impatience. A twinkle came into the old man's eye--ah, childhood, childhood--but just in time he suppressed the smile at the corners of his sunken mouth by sucking more vigorously at his half-extinct pipe. He mustn't let the lad notice his smile. Kirisk wasn't with him in the boat merely for the fun of it. He was about to begin the life of a sea-hunter. To begin it so as to end it one day at sea--such is the fate of the sea-hunter, for there is no more difficult and dangerous job. One must become used to it from childhood. That was why people in the past used to say, "Brains from heaven, secrets of the trade from childhood." And they also used to say, "A bad hunter is the tribe's burden." In other words, if he is going to be

a breadwinner, the hunter must start learning his trade very early in life. It was now Kirisk's turn; it was time to begin training the laddie and accustoming him to the sea.

They all knew about it; the whole settlement of the Fish Woman's clan near Piebald Dog knew that today's expedition was being undertaken for the benefit of Kirisk, future hunter and breadwinner. That was the custom: each male child was obliged to begin fraternising with the sea at a very early age so that the sea might know him and so that he might respect the sea. That was why the leader of the tribe, Organ, and two of the best hunters, Emrayin, the boy's father, and Mylgun, his father's cousin, were going out on a trip, obeying the age-old duty of the old to the young, this time to little Kirisk, who must get to know the sea, now and forever, on days of success and on days of failure alike.

Kirisk was still only a young boy, the mother's milk was not yet dry on his lips, and there was no knowing whether he would make out. But it was quite possible that when they themselves had given up their work and become frail old men, Kirisk might be the breadwinner and mainstay of the tribe. So it is ordained, so it passes from generation to generation, from father to son. That is what keeps life going.

But no one would mention that aloud. A man thinks to himself about this, but seldom talks about it. That is why out there, on the shore of Piebald Dog Bay, none of the Fish Woman's people attributed any particular importance to Kirisk's first hunting expedition. On the contrary, his fellow tribesmen even tried not to notice him going out to sea with the big hunters. As if they didn't take this venture seriously.

Only his mother saw him off, and even she, without saying a word about the future trip and without going as far as the bay, parted from him with, "Off you go into the forest!" pronounced distinctly, without looking at the sea, but staring towards the forest. "Mind you gather dry firewood and don't get lost in the forest!"

She said this in order to cover up his tracks, to protect him from the *kinri*, or evil spirits. And she never said a word about his father. As if Emrayin was not his father, as if Kirisk was not going out to sea with his father, but with others. Again, she kept quiet so that the *kinri* shouldn't find out that Emrayin and Kirisk were father and son. The evil spirits hate fathers and sons when they are out hunting together. They can destroy one of them so as to rob the other of strength and will, so that one of them, in his grief, should swear not to go to sea or not to enter the forest. That's what they're like, the cunning *kinri*, they're always on the look-out for the chance to do people mischief.

Kirisk himself was not afraid of the evil *kinri*; he wasn't an infant any more. But his mother feared them, and she was particularly terrified for his sake. "You're still too small," she would say. "It would be so easy for them to muddle your brains. It's true! Oh, those evil spirits, they do so much harm to the little ones--they send down all kinds of diseases; or they cripple a child so that he'll never be a hunter. And what use is a cripple! So it's very important to beware of the evil spirits, especially when you're small, when you haven't grown up yet. And when a man stands on his own feet, when he becomes himself, then no *kinri* can harm him. They won't get the better of him then, because they're scared of strong people."

So the mother took leave of her son. She stood in silence, hiding her fear, her prayers and her hope in that silence, and then she set off homewards, not once looking back towards the sea, not uttering a word about his father, as if she did not know where her husband and son had gone, although the evening before she had got them ready for the trip, had prepared food with reserve--for three days sailing, and now she pretended as if she knew nothing, she was so afraid for her son. She was so afraid that she did not betray her alarm in any way, just in case the evil spirits should sense how terrified she was at heart.

His mother went away without going as far as the

bay, but her son, weaving his way through the bushes and covering his tracks, hiding from the unseen *kinri* as he had been instructed by his mother--he didn't want to upset her on such a day--went off to catch up with the men, who were well in front of him.

He quickly overtook them. They were walking along in no particular hurry with their gear, their rifles and their tackle on their shoulders. Organ, the oldest, was leading; after him, conspicuous because of his figure and stature, came the broad-shouldered and bearded Emrayin, followed by Mylgun, short, sturdy and round as a tree-stump. They were wearing well-worn clothes for the sea, all of sealskin and leather to keep the warmth in and the wet out. Kirisk looked elegant compared with them. His mother had put some work in preparing his sea clothes. The leather sea-boots and the outer clothing were stitched along the hems. As if it matters at sea. But a mother is a mother.

"Why, we thought you'd stayed behind! We thought you'd been taken back home by the hand!" said Mylgun in mock surprise when Kirisk drew level with him.

"Why? Never in my life! Me?" Kirisk nearly choked at the insult.

"Now then, can't you take a joke? You mustn't go on like that. How else are folks to talk to one another at sea? Here, carry that!" He handed the boy his Winchester. And Kirisk gratefully stepped out beside him.

They had to load up the boat and shove off.

That is how the hunters go to sea. But the return, if they have been successful, if they come back home with a catch, will be different. Then they will rightly do honour to the boy. There will be the festival of welcome for the youthful hunter, songs will be sung about the bounty of the sea, in whose unfathomable depths the fish and animals multiply that are destined for strong, brave hunters. They will also praise in song the Fish Woman from whom they were descended, these people of the Fish Woman who dwelt on land. Then the log drums will boom under the blows of maple sticks, and amid the dancers, the shaman, the wise man will hold converse with the Earth and Water, and he will speak of Kirisk the new hunter. Yes, the shaman will talk to the Earth and Water about him, he will pray and ask the Earth and Water always to be good to him, that he might grow up a great hunter, that success will accompany him always on Earth and Water, that he will always be fated to share out his catch amongst old and small with all fairness. And the wise shaman will also beseech

the spirits that children may be born to Kirisk and all of them may live, so that the tribe of the Great Fish Woman shall multiply and descendants be added to descendants.

Where are you swimming, Great Fish Woman?
Your hot womb conceives life,
Your hot womb bore us by the sea,
Your hot womb is the best place in the world.
Where are you swimming, Great Fish Woman?
Your white breasts are like the heads of seals,
Your white breasts suckled us by the sea.

Where are you swimming, Great Fish Woman?
The strongest man will swim out to you
That your womb shall be fruitful,
That your tribe shall multiply on land...

Such are the songs that will be sung at the festival during the dances and merrymaking. And at that festival, another important event will take place for Kirisk. In a frenzied dance, the shaman will commit the boy's destiny as a hunter to one of the stars in the sky. Every hunter has his guardian star. But no one will ever find out to which star Kirisk's fate will be entrusted. Only the shaman and the invisible guardian star will know.

His mother and sister, of course, will rejoice more than anybody else, will sing louder than the others and dance until they can dance no more. And Emrayin, his father, will be addressed as a father before the whole tribe, and he also will be happy and proud. But he is not really a father yet. There are no fathers at sea, where all are equal and subordinate to the elder. What the elder says, goes. The father will not interfere. The son will not complain to his father. So it is ordained.

Perhaps Muzluk, the little girl who was his childhood playmate, will be delighted too. They play together less these days, and from now on they won't play at all: a hunter has no time for games.

The boat was going well, bounding lightly over the waves. They had put Piebald Dog Bay behind them a long time ago; they had passed Cape Long and, emerging from the bay into the open sea, had found that the waves were no heavier out at sea than in the bay. The waves were splashing to the same height with the same regularity. It is smooth going over such steady waves.

The boat was going well; it had been hewn out of a mighty poplar trunk. It stayed reliably on course, responding readily to the helm whether the waves came from the side or from in front.

Still sucking at his extinct pipe, Organ was enjoying the steady movement of the boat and felt as if he himself was a lightly-loaded boat gliding over the cold sea; as if he himself was travelling over the open spaces of the sea to the smooth creak of the rowlocks and the rhythmic sweep of the oars; as if he himself was cleaving the resilient oncoming waves with the keel as with his own breast, and was rocking slightly from the buffeting of the water. This sensation of total identification with the movement of the boat evoked strange thoughts. He was pleased with the craft, very pleased, even; after all, he had hewn and hollowed it out himself. They had felled the poplar together, since it would have been too much for four men, let alone one; but he had done the rest of the work himself: he had dried and hewn it for three summers and even then he knew that this was going to be the best kayak he had ever built. But, as he thought about it, he felt saddened in spite of himself; supposing this was to be the last in his life? He would like to live a little longer, would like to go on more deep-sea trips and hew another couple of kayaks while he still had the use of

his eyes and hadn't lost the knack.

So thinking, he conversed mentally with the boat. "I love you and trust you, brother kayak," he said. "You know the language of the sea, you know its ways, and that is your strength. You're a worthy kayak, the best of all I have built. You're a big kayak; you could carry three seals. You have brought us success. Therefore I respect you. We all love you when you labour under the weight of our catch, when you approach the shore, settling up to the gunwales and even shipping water. That's when they all come running down to the shore to meet you, brother kayak.

"If I die, ride long and ride far over places rich in game. If I die, carry strong young hunters over the sea. If I die, serve them as you've served me. And wait, brother kayak, for this offspring of ours, sitting in the bows up there and turning his head this way and that because he is so impatient--if it wasn't water, but land, he would run to the big hunt and manage things on his own, or so he thinks--wait, brother kayak, for this one to grow up too, to sail near and far with you. But today he is at sea with us for the first time. So it should be. Let him grow used to it. We shall depart, but he has long years ahead of him. If he takes after his father, Emrayin, he'll be a capable fellow. Not just any common braggart. Emrayin's probably the best hunter going. Tough and knowledgeable. I was like that myself once. At the height of my powers. The women loved me in those days. But I used to think that life went on forever. It's only later that you learn it doesn't! But the young ones don't want to know. Emrayin and Mylgun there aren't thinking about it. Oh, well. They'll find out yet. But they row well, with style. Mylgun and Emrayin work well together. They make a reliable and enduring pair. The boat seems to sail along the waves of its own accord. But it only seems so. It's hard work that takes you over the sea and there's tough rowing ahead. Today we won't reach the Third Dug before dark. And all the way back again

tomorrow. Since morning and all day. I'll take over from one, then the other; it's hard work, rowing across the sea. But if we go back with a catch, we'll have a celebration.

"D'you hear me, d'you understand me, brother kayak? You will take us to the islands, to the Three Dugs, to the place of the big hunt. That is what we have set out for. We'll find the seals there on their rookeries by the shore. Soon the young will be born.

"D'you understand me, brother kayak? Yes, you do. I began talking to you when you did not know the sea, when you still dwelt in the womb of the great poplar in the forest. I delivered you from the womb of the tree and now we are sailing on the ocean.

"And when I cease to be, don't forget me, brother kayak. Remember me as you sail across the sea..."

So thought Organ, steering a course straight out to sea from Piebald Dog Mountain, the main landmark on the coast. This rocky mountain had an unusual property marvelled at by all who went sailing: in clear weather the mountain seemed to grow higher as you receded from it. Just as if Piebald Dog was reluctant to fall back and was trailing you. You could look back as often as you liked, but Piebald Dog Mountain was always in sight. It would be visible for a long time as you went away from it, and then it would suddenly disappear behind the swell. Piebald Dog had gone home and land was far behind...

Then you had to remember, and remember well, where Piebald Dog Mountain had been when you left it behind; you had to remember the wind direction and the position of the sun in relation to the mountain, you had to note the clouds, if the weather was calm, and proceed out to sea until you reached the islands, keeping the bearing of Piebald Dog in mind so as not to lose your way on the open sea.

They were bound for the islands, which were nearly a whole day's rowing away. They were uninhabited, rocky islets, standing out like three nipples amid the

boundless watery waste. As a result, they were called the Three Dugs-Little, Middle and Big. Beyond them, if you went further, lay the road to the ocean which was without measure and whose name they did not know--the unexplored, unknown Great Water of eternity, arising out of itself, abiding there since the creation of the world, since the time when Luvr the Duck sped over it in search of a tiny spot for a nest--a piece of ground the size of your hand--and could not find it anywhere in the world. And there, on those islands, on the boundary between land and sea, the seals had their breeding-grounds during the spring. That was what the hunters had come out for, that was where they were bound...

Kirisk was shaken because the sea proved quite different from what he had imagined it to be in his games on the steep slopes of Piebald Dog; it wasn't even like what it had been during boat trips on the lagoon. He felt this very vividly when they emerged from the bay and the sea suddenly opened out, filling all visible space as far as the sky, turning into a single indivisible, unencompassable, single essence of the world.

Kirisk was impressed by the sea. He had not been expecting such a spectacle. Only water, heaving water, only waves swiftly rising and immediately subsiding, only the depths, the dark, disturbing depths and only the sky, softened by white, feathery and inaccessible clouds. That was the whole world--and nothing more, nothing else except this, except the sea itself--neither winter, nor summer, nor mountain, nor gully.

Water had flooded the world from end to end.

And the boat sped on, skipping over the waves. The boy still found it as exciting and thrilling to be in a boat in anticipation of the big hunt. However, he only half appreciated, superficially, light-heartedly everything that he saw and noticed around him, whether it was in the water or above it, since his mind was racing ahead in anticipation of other impressions.

At any other time, he would have been attracted by the endless play of the sunbeams on the water as they glided over the surface, transforming the face of the sea with shimmering hues from delicate mauve and dull green to the intense darkness in the shadow over the side; and he would have been delighted at the weird, inquisitive fishes that chanced to show up near the boat, and he would have laughed at the humpbacked salmon that collided with them in a dense shoal and, instead of swimming away, crowded together even more closely in fright and began leaping out of the water, comically turning over on to their backs in mid-air.

He did not pay much attention to any of this. Mere trifles. He craved only one thing--to reach the islands as soon as possible and get on with the job!

But soon the boy's mood altered rather strangely of its own accord, although he gave no sign of it. As they went further and further away from land, especially after Piebald Dog disappeared from sight behind the swelling blackness of the water, he began to detect a certain vague menace coming from the sea, and he felt his total dependence on that sea, his infinite smallness and infinite defencelessness when faced with a great element.

This was new to him. He now understood how dear Piebald Dog was to him, something he had never thought about before as he blithely and fearlessly romped on its slopes, admiring the in no way ominous sea from the summit of the mountain. Now he realised how mighty and good was the indestructible and omnipotent Piebald Dog.

He now understood the difference between land and sea. On land you don't think about the land. But at sea, you think about the sea all the time, even if your mind is on something else. This discovery put the boy on his guard. That the sea forced you to think about it all the time concealed something unknown, insistent, dominating...

The grown-ups, however, were calm. Emrayin and Mylgun rowed on as before, stroke after stroke, pulling as one man in a smooth, harmonious rhythm; the four oars dipped into the water at exactly the same moment, lightly and freely communicating a steady movement to the boat. Bu t this demanded ceaseless exertion from the rowers. Kirisk could not see their faces. They were sitting with their backs to him, but he could see their shoulders hunching and straightening up again. They seldom spoke to one another. True, his father sometimes managed to look back over his shoulder and smile through his beard at his son, as if to say, "How are you getting on?"

And so they sailed on. The grown-ups were calm and self-assured. Old Organ was completely imperturbable. Still sucking away at his pipe, he stayed where he was and steered the boat. So they sailed on, each absorbed in his work. True, Kirisk took to the oars once or twice, now partnering Mylgun, now his father. The rowers willingly let him have one of the oars as if to say, "Let him do a bit of work." And although he plied the oar with both hands, he couldn't cope for long: the boat was too heavy for him, and the oar was too big. But no one reproached him or complained, they just silently worked on all the harder.

When Piebald Dog suddenly disappeared from view, all brightened up for some reason.

"Piebald Dog's gone home!" announced his father.

"Yes, he has," confirmed Mylgun.

"Has he really? So he has." Organ looked that way too. "In that case, we're well on the way. Hey, Kirisk," he said craftily, turning to the boy, "hadn't you better call Piebald Dog? Maybe he'll come back!"

They all laughed, and so did Kirisk. He thought for a moment and said, "You'll have to turn round-that'll make him come back!"

"He's quick on the uptake!" exclaimed Organ, grinning. "But let's get on with the job. Come over to

me. You've stared long enough. You won't outstare the sea."

Kirisk left his place in the bows and began making his way towards the stem, stepping over the gear on the bottom of the boat: a pair of Winch esters wrapped in reindeer hide, a harpoon, a coil of rope, a cask of water, a sack of provisions and other bundles and clothing. As he squeezed his way along the side past the rowers, stepping over the oars as he did so, the boy caught the odour of strong male sweat and tobacco coming from the damp heads and backs. That same smell of his father's clothes that his mother loved to breathe when his father was at sea-she would pick up his old leather jacket and press her face to it.

The father nodded to his son and nudged him lightly in the side with his elbow, but did not let go of the oars. Kirisk, however, did not stop for his father's caress. Never mind that now. All are equal at sea. There are neither fathers nor sons. There is only the elder. And without his say-so, you mustn't do a thing.

"Sit down, squeeze in beside me," said Organ, pointing out a place for him and touching the boy's shoulder with his long, gnarled hand. "A little bit scared? You were alright at first, but then..."

Kirisk was put out: so Organ had noticed. But he still protested. "No, Grandad, I'm not a bit scared! What have I got to be scared of?"

"Well, after all, it's your first time at sea."

"What if it is the first time?" Kirisk wouldn't give in. "I'm still not scared of anything."

"That's the stuff. But when I went out the first time, and that was a long while ago, I have to confess I was frightened to death. I looked for the shore, and it wasn't there and Piebald Dog had run off somewhere. And nothing all round but waves. I wanted to go home. You just ask Emrayin and Mylgun how it was with them."

The two of them smiled knowingly in reply, nodded and applied themselves to their oars.

"But I'm not scared!" said Kirisk, holding his ground.

"Then you're a great lad if that's so," the old man assured him. "Now tell me, which way does Piebald Dog lie?"

The question was so unexpected that Kirisk had to think for a moment before he pointed with his hand:

"Over there!"

"Are you sure? Your hand's shaking a bit."

Controlling the tremor in his hand, the little boy pointed just a little further to starboard.

"Over there!"

"That's dead right now!" agreed Organ. "But if the kayak turns its bows that way, where will Piebald Dog be then?"

"Over there!"

"And if the wind bears us round that way?"

"Over there!"

"And if we sail a bit to port?"

"Over there!"

"Good. But how can you tell?" enquired Organ. "After all, we've got nothing round us but water."

"I've got other eyes," answered Kirisk.

"What kind of eyes?"

"I don't know. They're in my stomach, maybe, and they can see without seeing."

"In your stomach!" All burst out laughing.

"It's true, though," observed Organ. "There are such eyes. Only they're not in the stomach, they're in the head."

"Mine are in my stomach," insisted Kirisk, although he agreed that such sight can only be in the head.

A little while later, the old man began testing Kirisk again and, convinced that he had the ability to find direction at sea, rested content.

"Not bad, those eyes you've got in your stomach," he muttered.

Flattered by his praise, Kirisk started asking himself questions and finding the answers. For the

time being, with the sea relatively calm, this presented no serious difficulties. The trusty and great Piebald Dog responded unfailingly: without any particular effort of memory on Kirisk's part, it rose up before his inner vision exactly where it had been left, rose up visually, as it were, in all its massiveness, with the shaggy brushwood on its steep flanks, the patches of snow on its head and in its groin, and with the thundering, indefatigable, everlasting surf at the foot of the cliff. As he pictured Piebald Dog, the boy could not help but think of the other hills round it and involuntarily began thinking of home. He saw the small valley amid the hills on the shore, and in that valley, on the fringe of the forest, on the bank of a stream is their settlement: cabins, barns, dogs, chickens, fish-drying frames, smoke, voices, and his mother and his little sister Psulk. He could see them vividly in his mind's eye. His mother is secretly thinking about him, of course, and about his father, and about all of them, hunters out at sea. Yes, she must be thinking about them at this very moment. She's thinking about them, and she's very much afraid that the evil spirits might read her thoughts and find out about her fear. And if anyone else is thinking about him, then it must be Muzluk. Perhaps Muzluk has run over to play with Psulk. But his mother might scold her if she accidentally says something about him or asks after him while he is out at sea. His mother will surely tell her off: "What are you chattering about? Don't you know he's gone into the forest for firewood?" The girl will remember the taboo and be shamed into silence. Kirisk even feels sorry for her. He wants Muzluk to think about him, but he certainly doesn't want her to be scolded for doing so.

The boat continued on its way, bounding lightly over the waves. And the same turbulent sea glittered in the fine seething of the waves. At midday, the Nivkhi estimated that they would reach the first island by the end of the day at the latest (it was Little Dug, the

nearest of the three) and if they were successful, they would start hunting there. Then they had to get to the next one, Middle Dug, while it was still light, and spend the night there, since there was a convenient cove for the boat. Then out to sea again early in the morning. If they were lucky in the evening, if they got three seals, they could head for home again without further delay. Be that as it may, they must start back in the first half of the day, not later than when the sun was at the height of two poplars. It was well known that the earlier you left the sea, the better.

Organ had foreseen everything, he had it all cut and dried. And it wasn't the first time that his subordinates, Emrayin and Mylgun, had gone to the Three Dugs. They knew perfectly well what was what. The main thing was that the weather should hold and that the beasts should be found" in good time at their breeding-grounds. That was what mattered most, and as for the rest, each had to do his best.

It wasn't just by force of necessity that Organ went on these trips. Necessity is necessity, of course, and you won't survive without food from the sea; but he also went because the sea cast a spell on him. The vast open spaces put the old man in the mood for his most cherished reflections. He had precious thoughts of his own. No one prevented him from indulging in them at sea, for the sea gave him the chance to consider everything about which there is never time to think of ashore, amid the cares of everyday life. Out here, no one distracted Organ from his great thoughts. Out here he felt himself kindred to the Sea and the Sky.

He understood that in the infinity of space a man in a boat is nothing. But a man thinks and thereby ascends to greatness, thereby he affirms himself before the eternal elements, and thereby he is commensurable with the depth and height of worlds. That is why, as long as a man lives, he is in spirit as mighty as the sea and as infinite as the sky, for there are no bounds to his thought. When he dies, someone

else will think further ahead, and the next will think even further beyond that, and so on without end... The awareness of this gave the old man the bitter sweetness of irreconcilable reconciliation.

He knew that death is inevitable, that the bourne of his life was not so far away, that death puts an end to everything, but he also hoped for some reason that what he cherished and prized most in himself would abide, his great dreams of the Fish Woman would remain with him even after death. He could not pass his dreams on to another--visions are incommunicable and therefore he believed that they must not disappear without a trace... Must not. The Great Fish Woman is immortal and dreams of her should also be immortal.

He thought about this hard and often when at sea. He would be silent and withdrawn for a long time, not entering into conversation with the others. As he looked at the sea, addressing himself to someone unknown, he asked only for one thing: to be left with his dreams of the Great Fish Woman. Was it really impossible that dreams should go away with man into another world, that they should be dreamed eternally, for all time to come? Unable to find the answer, he tried to convince himself that it would be so, that the dreams would stay with him...

A long, long while ago, in times beyond living memory, three brothers lived on the coast near Piebald Dog. The eldest was a fast walker and a good climber, and always, wherever he was, he got things done on time. He married the daughter of a reindeer man, became the owner of reindeer herds and wandered off into the tundra. The youngest was a tracker and a crack marksman. He also married, took himself a girl from among the forest people, went into the taiga and became a hunter there. But the middle brother was lame from birth and was always in bad luck: he got up early and went to bed late to no purpose--he couldn't run after the reindeer and he couldn't track the beasts in the forest. No one in the district gave him his

daughter's hand in marriage, his brothers abandoned him, and he was left alone by the blue sea.

He managed by fishing. We know where that gets you.

One day, the hapless lame brother was sitting in his boat with his line cast into the sea. Suddenly, he felt it tugging. violently in his hands. He was overjoyed; this was going to be a real catch! He began pulling in the big fish, drawing it nearer and nearer to the boat.

He looked and--wonders! That fish had the form of a woman! She was thrashing about in the water, trying to get away. And she was incredibly beautiful; smooth body shimmering with silver like river pebbles on a moonlit night, white breasts with dark nipples standing up like young fir cones, and green eyes sparkling with fire. He lifted the Fish Woman out of the water and held her; she embraced him, and they lay down in the boat. The lame brother's head spun with happiness. He couldn't remember what happened to him, and it seemed to him that the boat was tossed up to the very heavens. The sea swung up to the sky, the heavens swung down to the sea. Then everything was suddenly quiet, as after a storm. The Fish Woman leapt out of the boat and swam away. The lame brother started calling her and beseeching her to return, but she didn't answer and vanished into the depths of the sea.

That was what happened to the lame middle brother, all alone and abandoned by everyone on the edge of the sea. The Fish Woman swam away and never appeared again. But the lame brother began yearning and pining for her greatly. Ever since then, he spent all his days and nights walking along the seashore and calling the Fish Woman, beseeching her, asking her to show herself, even if only from far away.

He walked along the beach at high-tide, singing:

Where are you swimming, Great Fish Woman?

He walked along at low-tide, singing:

Where are you swimming, Great Fish Woman?

He walked in the moonlit night, singing:

This sea is my sorrow.
These waters are my tears.

He walked in the dark night, singing:
Where are you swimming, Great Fish Woman?. </TABLE< center>

He walked at high tide, singing, and he walked at low tide, singing…

Meanwhile winter passed, spring passed after it, and once in summertime the hapless lame brother was ambling along the beach; he was wading up to his knees in the surf and looking out to sea all the time-mightn't the Fish Woman suddenly appear? He called and called her-mightn't she suddenly answer him? Then suddenly he heard what sounded like a child crying in the shallows. It was as if a little baby was weeping its heart out. He ran over and couldn't believe his eyes: a baby boy was sitting stark naked at the very water's edge; a wave would wash over him, then it would retreat, and he wept and kept saying in a loud voice, "Who's my father? Where's my father?" The lame brother marvelled even more and, poor fellow, he didn't know what to do. The infant saw him and said, "You're my father! Take me with you, I'm your son!"

So that's what had come of it! The man took his son and carried him home.

The little boy grew up fast. He began sailing on the sea. He proved a brave, sturdy fisherman and hunter. He was born lucky: if he cast a net, it came out full of fish; if he shot an arrow, it pierced a sea-beast right through. His fame travelled far, over the forests and mountains. He was respectfully given the hand of a maid from a forest tribe. Children were born, and thus the tribe of the Fish Woman's people multiplied.

And so this song is sung at their festivals:

Where are you swimming, Great Fish Woman?
Your hot womb conceives life,
Your hot womb bore us by the sea,
Your hot womb is the best place in the world.
Where are you swimming, Great Fish Woman?
Your white breasts are like the heads of seals,
Your white breasts suckled us by the sea.

Where are you swimming, Great Fish Woman?
The strongest man will swim out to you
That your womb shall be fruitful,
That your tribe shall multiply on land...

This dream engulfed him, like the implacably surging tide from the depths of the ocean, plunging beach, grasses and dunes for a time into the enchanted transparency of the underwater gloom.

This dream invariably had an overwhelming and lasting effect on Organ. He believed in it so much that

he never told a soul on earth about his meetings with the Fish Woman, as he would never have told anyone about similar incidents in everyday life.

Yes, it was a haunting dream that often visited the old man, bringing him consolation, sorrow and unearthly agonies of soul. The amazing property of this vision was that it always struck Organ with the profundity of its meaning and the multiplicities of the suggestions contained in the incredible transformations and oddities of the dream. As he pondered over it, trying to fathom the mystery of mysteries--the eternally elusive, ceaselessly changing connection between visions and real life that eternally torments man with its mystery and unreadable omens. Organ caught himself thinking that, for all his confusion of soul, he always craved the return of those dreams, with undiminished yearning he always craved a meeting with the Great Fish Woman...

He used to meet her out at sea. In anticipation of her appearance, he would go down to the shore and would walk expectantly along the deserted sands of the beach, which would not retain footprints, but which preserved the black, unmoving shadows cast by the dying rays of the departed sun. The shadows lay like black snow over which he walked in anguish, overwhelmed by a piercing, inhuman sorrow. The pain of love, the pain of desire and of hope filled his heart to overflowing, while the sea remained deserted and impartial. No wind, no sound, no rustle was present in the tense, silent world of solitude. And he would wait, steadily gazing out to sea, hoping for a miracle, hoping for her to appear.

And he felt heavy at heart because the soundless waves drove the white foam of the soundless surf along his path. Voiceless seagulls whirled silently overhead like enormous, dancing snow-flakes. He felt lost in this deafened and muted space; he felt heartsick, he felt his immeasurable and implacable yearning for her become more keen and agonising the longer he waited, and

even in sleep he understood that he would sicken, that he would perish in that void of loneliness if he did not see her, if she did not appear. Then he would begin shouting and calling for her. But he could not hear his own voice, for his voice was mute, like all the sounds in that strange dream. And the sea was silent. The only sounds were his own laboured breathing, loud and erratic, and the irrepressible pounding of his own heart, throbbing wildly at his temples. They unnerved him. He did not know what to do or how to escape from himself. He waited for the Fish Woman like a lunatic, as passionately and wildly as a drowning man waits for the last hope of rescue. He knew that only she, the Fish Woman, could give him happiness; he knew, and he waited until his strength began to fail.

When, at last, she rose swiftly to the surface, when she swam towards him with her gaze fixed on him, her blurred face glimmering among the waves, the silence of the world crashed down like a rockfall. Shouting and exulting, he welcomed the return of sounds: the newly awakened din of the surf, the noise of the wind and the screaming of the seagulls overhead. Shouting and exulting, he would dive into the sea and swim towards her, himself transformed into a fast-swimming creature, like a whale.

And she, the Fish Woman, waited for him and swam round in tempestuous circles, soaring for a moment above the surface and, quivering all over, in long slow leaps, her living bodily flesh clearly outlined, so that she resembled a very ordinary woman with beautiful hips who had suddenly found her element in the sea.

He would swim up to her and they would head out for the ocean.

They swam together, side by side, lightly touching one another in headlong ever-swifter movement. This was what he had languished for in the torments of yearning and the silence of solitude.

They were together now. With inconceivable strength and speed they raced into the glittering

remoteness of the nocturnal ocean, where a strange radiance rose from the depths to glitter on the quivering line of the horizon. They were being borne thither, to the unattainable horizon, their bodies cleaving the foaming crests of the waves that endlessly rushed to meet them; they were racing over endless undulations, now tossed upwards, now sliding down, from crest to crest, from trough to trough, enthralled with the joy of exultant flight. And beside them, accompanying them, following them like a bouncing mirror patch extended in flight, hurrying over the waves, was the yellow moon. Only the moon and only they, he and the Fish Woman, only they reigned in this boundless ocean space, only they and the ocean! It was the summit of their happiness, it was the intoxication of freedom, it was the triumph of their tryst...

They raced on endlessly and powerfully, driven by an insurmountable desire to reach a place on earth intended for them, where, overwhelmed by passion, they could come together at last so as to know in one lightning moment all the sweetness and all the bitterness of life's beginning and end...

So they swam, headlong, irresistibly, in the hope of soon achieving the desired goal.

And the faster they swam, the more furiously the frantic impatience of the flesh blazed up within him. He swam tirelessly, racing ahead with all his strength like a salmon bearing to the spawning-grounds all its vital energy down to the last, single, exhausting drop. He swam on, ready to die of love. And the mysterious Fish Woman drew him further and further out into the ocean, still flying over the waves in a sparkling rainbow cloud of spray, thrilling Organ with her pearly warmth, her urgency and the suppleness of her body. He caught his breath at the perfection of her beauty as she was washed by the blue and white eddying streams of water.

They did not talk about anything, they simply gazed endlessly at one another, each peering through the streaming water and the spray at the blurred outlines of the other's face, and they raced over the ocean in the impatient and ever-mounting anticipation of the place and hour appointed to

them by fate...

But they never reached that place, and the hour never came...

More often than not, the dream ended in nothing: everything suddenly broke off and. vanished like smoke. Then he was left in a state of utter bewilderment. He was truly disappointed and had a sense of yearning, of dissatisfaction, of unfulfilment. After a long interval, he would recall everything from the beginning again and would think seriously about what it all meant and what purpose it served, for in his heart of hearts he believed that what he had dreamed was more than just a dream. After all, even if you happen to recall an ordinary dream, you soon forget it. There's no sense in giving yourself a headache over such trifles. But Organ could never forget the Fish Woman; he thought of her as something that had really happened and was part of reality. And so the meeting and sudden parting from the Fish Woman caused him intense suffering.

What caused him the greatest anguish of soul, however, was when the dream ended badly. In such cases, he was racked by great despair and grief, unable to find an explanation for the baffling outcome.

He dreamed that they were just about to swim up to the hallowed place, that a shore was already in sight. It was the shore of love and they headed straight for it, they swam as fast as they could, gripped by a frenzied desire to reach that shore where they could surrender themselves to one another. They would be quite close to the shore, when suddenly they would find themselves on a sandy bed of shallows where the water was below knee-height and where they could not swim any more. Organ would look round: the Fish Woman would be thrashing frantically about in the shallow water, vainly trying to free herself from the clutches of the cunning sand. Streaming with cold sweat, Organ would dash to help her. But a whole eternity would pass by as, trapped in the sand that was sucking him down like a quagmire, he crawled forward on his hands and knees, dragging after him legs that refused to obey him and were as weak as if they were not his own. The Fish Woman would be quite close to him, he could almost reach her, but it was agony trying to do so; he would gasp for breath, choke, sprawl on the slimy bottom and get tangled up in the clutching weeds. But it was even more agonising to see his beautiful Fish Woman, struggling and thrashing about. When he finally reached her and, staggering dizzily, waded

ashore hugging her to his breast, he clearly heard her heart beating like that of a winged bird. And because of this, because he was carrying her in his arms, pressing her tightly to himself, because his whole being was flooded with pity and tenderness for her until it hurt, as if he was carrying a helpless child in his arms, a stiff, hot lump would rise to his throat. Touched, ashamed because of the Fish Woman, he would force himself not to weep. He would carry her with a sinking heart, moving smoothly along, pausing from time to time, thinking of her at every step, And she would implore him, would tearfully entreat him to take her back to the sea and to freedom. She would be choking for breath, she would be dying, she could not love him away from the great sea. She would weep and look up at him mutely with such an appealing, heart-rending gaze that he could not bear it any longer. He would turn back and wade through the shallows out to sea, going deeper and deeper into the water, and then he would carefully release her from his embrace.

The Fish Woman would swim out to sea, but he would be left behind, dazed and alone. As he watched her go, Organ would wake up sobbing...

Where are you swimming, Great Fish Woman?
This sea is my yearning.
These waters are my tears.
Where are you swimming, Great Fish Woman?..

He found the memory distressing and unbearable, as if he really had held the Fish Woman in his arms and had set her free. Why had it happened like that? Was it really impossible for any of man's desires to be fulfilled in a dream? On whom did it depend? Who or what was behind it, what was the sense of it, what was the story and what was the point of it? Lost in surmise, Organ would brush these thoughts aside and try to forget about the Fish Woman. But as soon as he went out hunting, he began, without realising it, to think about her and about everything associated with her. At sea, he relived the strange dream all over again and,

as he reflected soberly on it, he marvelled and asked himself why he was thinking about it at all. What was he doing, yearning for a non-existent Fish Woman in his old age? He reproached himself and admitted that were it not for her, his life would lose all meaning--he was already an old man and he wasn't as strong as he used to be, his eyesight wasn't so good, he was no longer good-looking and he had lost most of his teeth. Everything for which he had been famous was going away, was being destroyed. Death wasn't far away, and only his breast refused to give in; the desires in his breast were as alive as in his youth. The trouble was that the soul does not grow old. Which is why he was thinking such thoughts and having such dreams--only in his sleep and in his thoughts is man immortal and free. In dream he soars up to heaven and in dream he plunges down into the depths of the sea. He is great in that, until the very hour of his death, he thinks about everything that is in life. But death takes no account of this: death does not care what a man has lived; or what greatness he has achieved in his thoughts, or what he has dreamed, what he has been like, what sort of a mind he had and what he used it for--all this means nothing to death. Why is it so? Why is it so arranged in this world? Let the Fish Woman be a dream, but let that dream remain with him there too, in the other world...

Just as he believed in the Fish Woman, so did Organ believe that the sea was listening to him. At sea he could breathe and think freely. At sea he could pour out his soul. Wrapped in his own thoughts, he sometimes even asked himself, "Wasn't it here that she and I swam together?"

At such moments, he would refill his pipe. He would bemuse himself with tobacco smoke. "Where does it grow, this plant that's supposed to be evil, but comforts the soul... In Manchuria, the merchants say. That's where they bring it from. It's far away, is Manchuria, oh, it's far away, none of our people has ever been there... Does tobacco really grow there, like

grass in the forest? There's a miracle for you, anything's possible on this earth..."

The sun had already rolled past noon. Several times it had gone behind the clouds that suddenly sailed up from somewhere behind the horizon, as if there was a nest of bad weather hidden there: the sea would momentarily lose its lustre, its face would darken and the world would turn gloomy and unfriendly. Then the sun would look out again, it would shine generously and clearly through the gaps in the clouds, as in spring, and the sea would glitter with myriads of living, floating points of light, so dazzling that the eyes ached, and again he felt as if a burden had been lifted off his mind.

Although Kirisk was now used to the open sea and was even beginning to feel a little bored, he still hadn't lost the feeling of wonder at its vastness and boundlessness. They had rowed far yet there was still no sign of the end. On land, however vast it might be, he would never have marvelled at it, as much as at sea.

The grown-ups did not marvel at anything in the least, they were used to it all. Emrayin and Mylgun carried on rowing steadily just as before, cleanly dipping their oarblades into' the surface of the water. They worked tirelessly, not even allowing Organ to take over and give them a rest, saying that it would be better on the return trip when they were fully loaded; then he could help, but let him steer the course for the time being. Organ, with his bulging Adam's apple and his long neck, sat hunched in the stem like a sea eagle watching out for its prey. He was silent, thinking his own thoughts.

But the boat sped on, still bounding lightly over the waves. And the waves were, as before, of moderate strength. The wind was low and steady.

And on they went...

"Grandad, Grandad! There's the island! Little Dug!" shouted Kirisk joyously all of a sudden, and he tugged Organ by the sleeve.

"Where's the island?" said Organ disbelievingly, shading his eyes with his hand. And the rowers looked round in amazement to where the boy was pointing.

"It shouldn't be," muttered the old man, for the boy was pointing in a totally different direction from the one they expected.

The boy wasn't imagining things. There, in the distance, a long way off, there was indeed a motionless irregular band of dirty-brown hue like a stretch of land emerging from the water. Organ peered hard at it for a long time.

"No, that's not the island," he said with conviction at last. "To get to Little Dug, we have to go straight ahead, towards the sunset on the course we're taking now. But that's a long way out. And it's not an island," he continued. "I reckon it's not an island."

"There was never any such island in these waters, we've never seen one like that," said Mylgun. "Little Dug will be on our port side, but I don't know what that thing is."

"Is it fog or a cloud?" said Emrayin. "Or a big roller--only why isn't it moving?"

"I wonder what it is? Mist or cloud, who knows? It's a long way off. That's no island," reasoned Organ. "But if it's mist, that's nothing to feel happy about."

"No matter, as long as the wind doesn't change," was Emrayin's opinion as he bent to his oars. "It's staying put, it's not moving. But there's nothing for us to do over there, so leave well alone..."

Kirisk was disappointed at first, but he soon forgot about it. The hunters were not mistaken. Little Dug soon rose up from the water on the port side. There was no doubt about it this time. It was a small, rocky, hilly protuberance of land and it was indeed reminiscent of a dug.

When they saw it, they all cheered up, especially Kirisk. The sea wasn't endless after all and now began the most interesting part of the trip.

"Well, now," said Organ, patting the hood on the little boy's head, "Piebald Dog's taken us to the island,

although he stayed at home himself. Would he drown if he ran after us?"

"He certainly would!" confirmed Kirisk, entering into the spirit of the game.

"But we need Piebald Dog to stay behind and watch the house, and as long as we remember him, we get to the hunting grounds without losing our way. What do you think, will we be needing Piebald Dog again?"

"No, we won't," replied Kirisk, again with complete confidence. "We can see where to go now."

"Think again!" said Organ reproachfully. "You're supposed to be clever, so think again."

Kirisk couldn't imagine why they should still need that Piebald Dog out at sea by a distant island.

"What do we need Piebald Dog here for?"

"How are you going to get back home? Where are you going to head for, in which direction? Come on, think! Have you guessed? Remember the direction we're coming and which side of the island is looking at Piebald Dog, and then you'll know where to head for when it's time to go back."

Kirisk silently agreed, but his vanity had been stung nevertheless and perhaps that was why he asked some what heatedly, "And supposing it's dark? Then what? If we're at sea in the night and we can't see anything, then what? How are we to find out where Piebald Dog is?"

"What of it? We can still find out," replied Organ calmly. "There are stars in the sky for that. The stars won't let you down, they'll always show you the exact way. Only you have to know which star is where. You'll learn in time. D'you know the constellation of Luvr the Duck?"

"I think so," said Kirisk hesitantly, looking at his father. Emrayin understood his son's embarrassment.

"He's got a vague idea. I showed him once. But that's not enough. He'll have to learn more..."

And so they carried on, gradually approaching the island. When separate rocks and crags became distinguishable, they rowed round the island, looking

intently at the shoreline to find the seals' breeding-ground. Kirisk looked very hard; he wanted to be the first to spot a herd. He had been warned not to make too much noise if he saw anything. Organ had said that the seals lie somewhere near the water's edge among the rocks on the shore; they crawl up on to dry land to bask in the sun. The hunters had to note where they were, then go stealthily ashore and creep up to them unnoticed so as not to frighten them. Even so, Kirisk could not see anything. The shore was deserted and bleak. Nothing but bare, shapeless, time-weathered rocks. A rim of boiling white surf roared round the island, splashing up over the piled-up, ice-covered rocks. No, Kirisk could not see anything on the island. Only rocks on top of rocks and no living creatures.

Mylgun spotted the seals first. While Kirisk was turning his head this way and that, trying to see just where the seals were hiding, the boat went a little further away so as not to be seen from the breeding-ground.

Organ realised that Kirisk had not seen anything.

"Didn't you see?" he asked.

The boy couldn't tell a lie.

"No, I didn't," he confessed. "Let's row up again," commanded Organ. "Learn to spot them among the rocks. Or you'll never be a hunter."

The rowers obeyed the order and took the boat back to its former place, although this was risky. It only needed one seal to raise the alarm for the whole herd to rush down into the sea. Fortunately, the animals did not notice the hunters. They were lying behind a rocky ridge amid the rough, chaotically scattered stones almost at the water's edge.

"You see that sharp rock there like a broken tusk, and a reddish, iced-up mound not far from it? Now look between them," said Mylgun to Kirisk.

Kirisk stared hard. Meanwhile, Mylgun and Emrayin paddled with their oars, trying to keep the boat stationary. At that point, Kirisk saw the backs of the sea creatures, powerful tailed carcasses. The

greyish, patched, glossy backs were motionless. From a distance, the unpractised eye could not distinguish them from rocks.

This was where the thrills began for Kirisk. This was the beginning! They were real sea beasts! There it was, a big hunt!

When they went ashore later, he was full of courage and delight. Courage, because he was feeling strong and important. Delight, because he could see how smoothly the hunters worked together: how they brought the boat up to the shore, how Emrayin and Organ used their oars to keep it near the surf, how Mylgun nimbly jumped out on the edge of the shingle, how he threw the loose mooring-line over his shoulder and pulled the boat in and how his father snatched up the Winchesters and jumped ashore. After him, not without some help from Organ, Kirisk jumped too, though he got his legs soaked by a breaker and was told off quietly by his father.

Organ was left behind in the boat to keep it afloat by the shore while the three of them, Emrayin, Mylgun and Kirisk, hurried towards the rookery. They went along the shore, instinctively bending double, in quick dashes from cover to cover. Kirisk kept up with them, his heart thudding wildly in his breast and his head reeling with an intoxicating sense of pride and excitement.

If only the people of the Fish Woman could see him now, swiftly advancing with the big hunters on the sea beasts! If his mother could see him now, how proud of him she would be, the future great provider and breadwinner of the tribe. If Muzluk could see him now, Muzluk, with whom he had often played; but with whom he would never play again, for he now bore the name of hunter; if she could see him, far away from his native Piebald Dog, making his way along the unfamiliar, wave-lashed shore through the bare crags and rocks towards the rookery of the seals. And it did not matter that Mylgun and Emrayin were carrying the Winchesters; his father had promised to put one into

his hands when the time came to shoot.

They walked ahead, stealing up to the breeding-grounds; then they started crawling on their hands and knees, and Kirisk did likewise. It was hard and uncomfortable going over the rough rocks and the jagged ice, but Kirisk realised that it was necessary.

On they crawled, breathing heavily, bathed in sweat, sometimes taking cover, sometimes looking round them. When all they had left to do was to get into position and fire, they froze and kept quiet.

For the rest of his life, Kirisk was to remember that moment, that spring day, that cold, rocky little island amid the infinitely vast sea and the wild, dark-red rocks, torn up and hurled in all directions by some crazy force. He would remember that stark, frozen, lifeless, still partly iced-up ground on which he was lying prone, with his father and Mylgun beside him making ready to shoot, while ahead of them, in a hollow, right at the edge of the sea, amid the wreckage of the rocks shattered by winds and storms, there was a small herd of seals that had so far suspected nothing and were peacefully lying at their ease. Over them, over the breeding-ground, over the island, over the sea, a somewhat gloomy, chill sky, as it seemed to him at the time, was waiting tensely for the first shot.

"If I can only score a hit!" he thought, applying his shoulder to the butt of the Winchester that his father had handed to him.

In the brief, long-awaited moment when, feeling truly proud of himself, he could already see himself as the celebrated, valiant hunter, he was suddenly struck by the defencelessness and vulnerability of the living backs and flanks of those clumsy fat creatures that had made their way into a rocky hollow, hoping for the meagre warmth of the sun. But it was only a momentary qualm. He remembered that he was a hunter and that people expected him to bring home a catch, and that without seal flesh and seal fat, life is hungry and meagre, and it occurred to him that he must shoot rust and prove himself. He became strong

in spirit, firmly taking aim, as his father had advised-under the left flipper and a little higher and a little to the right-at the very heart of a big, mottled seal. But the seal, as if sensing danger, suddenly went on the alert, although it couldn't see or scent the hunters, since the wind was blowing from the sea. Kirisk had to move a little more to one side for a better view something was interfering in front, a kind of shadow. He had to move up very carefully, but just then a stone came loose under Kirisk's elbow; it rolled down the slope, taking other stones with it on the way. The mottled seal uttered an abrupt bark; the herd jumped and, with a roar, started crawling and slithering quickly down to the water. Just at that moment, however, a shot rang out before the herd could get away to sea. It was Mylgun saving the situation. A big seal on the edge of the herd was hit. Kirisk was flustered.

"Shoot!" ordered Emrayin.

Kirisk felt a sharp impact on his shoulder, the shot banged in his ears and everything went deaf. Kirisk felt unbearably ashamed that he had missed and that the hunt had been ruined because of him. But his father pushed him another cartridge.

"Load and shoot fast!"

What had not seemed a particularly difficult operation, loading and firing (how many times had he gone through the motions when he had been learning to shoot), would not come off this time. The rifle bolt refused to budge at first. In the meantime, Mylgun fired two more shots from the kneeling position at the seals as they plunged into the water. He hit one, and it began Turning round and round right at the water's edge. The hunters ran towards it. The herd was already disappearing into the sea, but the wounded animal left on the shore was trying with all its strength to crawl into the water. When the men ran up to that spot, the seal managed to reach the water and, dragging a bloodily wavering patch after it, began swimming, working its flippers and slowly sinking into

the transparent depths of the sea. Its terrified, rolling eyes were clearly visible, as was the bright mauve stripe along the back from the nape of the neck to the tip of the tail. Mylgun lowered the Winchester which he had thrown up ready to shoot; there was no sense in finishing the seal off now.

"Leave her, she's going to drown anyway," said Emrayin.

Kirisk just stood there, breathless, despondent, dissatisfied with himself. He had been expecting a lot more. So much for the great hunter!

The boy was silent, summoning up all his strength so as not to burst into tears of chagrin. He felt so disappointed.

"Never mind, you'll have a success yet," said Mylgun reassuringly when they had started gutting the shot seal. "We're going to Middle Dug soon, and the herds are bigger there."

"I was just in too much of a hurry," began Kirisk, but his father interrupted him.

"Don't justify yourself. No one becomes a hunter with his first shot. Really, you know how to shoot, so you'll get your seal yet."

Kirisk kept quiet, but was inwardly grateful to the grown-ups for not reproaching him. And now he promised himself never to hurry when hunting and not to think of anything else, to shoot for certain, when eye and breathing, as his father had taught him, "move into the sights". That was when he must fire the bullet!

The seal was big, heavy, and warm, as if still alive. Mylgun rubbed his hands with satisfaction as he skinned and gutted the belly. "The fat's four fingers thick. It's good!" His disappointment forgotten already, Kirisk helped him with enthusiasm. Meanwhile, Emrayin went to Organ to moor the boat somewhere close at hand.

He soon returned, worried and in a hurry.

"Time's running out, let's get a move on!" And, with a glance up at the sky, he added, for the benefit of no

one in particular, "I don't like the look of the weather..."

The hunters quickly gutted the carcass, keeping only the liver and the heart, and dragged the seal on tied poles to the boat. Kirisk followed them, carrying both Winchesters.

Organ was waiting for them on the shore near the boat. The old man was overjoyed.

"May great Kurng hear how pleased we are! That's not bad for a start," he continued, preparing his hunter's knife for the feast. They were coming to the most important ritual after a hunt, the eating of raw seal liver on the spot. Organ squatted down by the carcass and cut the liver into pieces. Sprinkling it with a little salt, the hunters gulped down the tender pieces of liver, smacking their lips with relish. The liver was very tasty-tender, warm, filling. It melted in the mouth, flooding the tongue with its rich juice. Kirisk's dream had come true: he was eating raw liver during hunt like a real man!

"Swallow it down, swallow more of it down!" advised Organ. "It's going to be a cold night and you'll freeze. Liver's the most warming thing there is. And the number one cure for all illnesses."

Yes, it was wonderful. They ate their fill and at once wanted a drink. But the water was in the cask back in the boat.

"It's not worth dividing up the carcass now," said Emrayin when all had had enough, and he looked uneasily up at the sky again.

"That can wait," agreed Organ. "We'll make some tea for the night when we're settled on Middle Dug," he added. "We'll manage for the time being. Let's load up."

Before actually leaving, the hunters did not forget to feed the earth. The finely chopped-up seal's heart was scattered with a prayer to the lord of the island so that he would not refuse to grant them success next time. Then they loaded up and pushed off again.

They were leaving Little Dug behind them. The

solitary, forlorn little island in the midst of the bleak waters evoked a feeling of pity and futility. They were on course for Middle Dug. Evening was approaching. The rowers applied themselves to their oars in a hurry to reach Middle Dug while it was still light. They could moor the boat in a sheltered place and spend the night there. Little Dug soon disappeared from view as if it had sunk down into the sea, but Middle Dug was not yet in sight. They were completely surrounded by water.

While they were hunting, the sea had changed noticeably. The water seemed to have become more dense, more solid. The main body continued to roll in its former direction, but the wind had already changed. The boat was now being rocked and buffeted much more severely. But the hunters were worried most of all by the sky. What did it presage? Something incomprehensible and unexpected at this time of the year! From goodness knows where, a flying murk covered the sky with a pale, streaming curtain, like a haze driven by the upper winds from distant fires raging somewhere in the dark forests. And although this haze only veiled the sky and hindered no one in any way, the hunters frowned.

"Where's the mist coming from?" muttered Organ, looking round him uneasily.

They were now rowing hard, expecting with every stroke of the oars that Middle Dug, the most convenient and reliable of the three islands, would suddenly appear in front of them.

Meanwhile, the sky had actually cleared, and the sun even peeped out again from the rim of the sea or, perhaps, from the end of the world: it was so remote and unreal. You could easily stare at the sun without having to look away. Distinctly outlined and suffused with purple, it was already fading, but still glowing mistily on the distant horizon. A gap of sky appeared, and light and, tranquility reigned in the world again. This was enough to relieve the tension. The men in the boat were already anticipating comfort and relaxation

on the island.

"Hold out a bit longer and Middle Dug will show up ahead," said Organ to Kirisk, who was sitting beside him, and he clapped him encouragingly on the back.

The boy had been feeling thirsty for some time, but he was saying nothing about it, in his childlike naiveté strictly obeying his father's injunction that drinking water was always scarce on a trip and couldn't be consumed at will, as at home. There wasn't a drop of fresh water on any of the three islands. It was also impossible to take extra weight on the boat. He was only to have a drink when the others did.

During the bright interval, when the horizon cleared and the sun looked through, the boy became aware of Organ's kindliness.

"Grandad, I'm very thirsty!" he said, smiling bravely and glancing at Emrayin.

"Of course!" said Organ with an understanding smile. "No wonder after that liver! But then we're all thirsty, aren't we?"

Emrayin and Mylgun nodded approvingly from their places. Kirisk was delighted: they all wanted a drink, not just him.

"In that case, let's treat ourselves to a drop of water and a smoke to follow!" With these words, Organ made fast the helm, lifted the cask of water up off the bottom of the boat, stood it in a more convenient position and began pouring water out of the spigot into a tinned copper dipper. The water had been drawn from a spring on the inland side of Piebald Dog. That was the place for the best water, always clean and fresh. In summer, it used to smell of steeped herbs and moist earth.

Kirisk held the dipper under the trickle of water. He was eager to quench his thirst. When the dipper was half full, Organ pushed the spigot home.

"Drink!" he told Kirisk. "And then serve the others. And don't spill any!" he warned.

Kirisk drank eagerly at first, and more slowly towards the end. He noticed that the water already

smelt of wood.

"Had enough?" inquired Organ.

"Yes."

"Not quite--I can see it in your eyes. Oh well, so be it. I'll give you just a drop more. Liver's strong stuff. If we were on land you could down a whole bucketful," added the old man, pouring some more on to the bottom of the dipper.

Kirisk drank his fill and felt the rightness of the words that adults use in such cases: Oh, I feel better now!

Then the rowers were given three quarters of a dipperful each. Kirisk himself handed it to them. Having drunk his own fill, he had nothing against his father and Mylgun likewise drinking as much as they wanted. Organ, as senior, however, thought it necessary to explain to him why he had poured them three quarters of a dipperful each.

"You're still small, but they're that big! And they've got a hard job to do. You get very thirsty when you're rowing. "

And indeed, the two of them drained their dippers at once and had to have more. This time, Organ told them off.

"Don't overdo it, lads. We're not sitting on a river bank!"

Emrayin and Mylgun only grinned in reply. They saw the point, but they couldn't do anything about it: they were thirsty.

After he had drunk his share of water, Organ shook his head with a smile.

"Wouldn't be bad if we were sitting by a river. You see how strong it is, that fresh liver..."

Then he filled his pipe, lit up and began puffing blissfully away, unaware that he was never going to enjoy this solace again...

It was Kirisk who first saw disaster ahead.

Before he did, however, there was an amazing

moment of tranquility when all of them, their thirst assuaged, felt content and happy.

The first seal had been taken, they would soon be able to relax on the island and in the morning there would be another big hunt for the sea creatures. Immediately after the hunt, there would be the return home without further delay. Everything was under control.

The boat travelled on, bounding over the waves as before. Organ handled the helm, sucking his pipe and, perhaps, thinking about his Fish Woman. Emrayin and Mylgun rowed doggedly on, plying the oars without apparent effort, cleanly and with style. Kirisk couldn't help admiring the hunters. With a boy's insight, he spent some time studying each of them separately. He unconsciously loved them and was proud to be out on a trip with them at this hour.

Kirisk could not imagine these men different from what they were. Organ must always have been Organ, with his bulging Adam's apple, his long neck, his long arms that were knotted like roots and his habitually rheumy, omniscient eyes. Could it be otherwise? Was it possible to imagine life without an elder, without this man whom everyone respected?

His mother used to say that Kirisk took very much after his father and that when he grew up, he would be the spitting image of Emrayin. His eyes, she said, were exactly the same hazel-brown, like acorns, and his teeth were strong and just like Emrayin's, with the two front teeth protruding slightly. And his beard, she said, would be as black and thick as his father's. Not for nothing was he known as Emrayin the Beard. And when Kirisk was a small boy, when he was still bathing naked in the stream, his mother would nudge her sister in the ribs and say, "Look, look, exactly like his father." And amused at something between the two of them, they would laugh themselves helpless, whispering naughtily to one another, and his mother would say that if Kirisk got such a wife as herself when

he grew up, then his wife wouldn't be let down, she would be satisfied, that she knew well. This puzzled him. What was she going to be satisfied with, and in what way? And why was his wife going to be satisfied if he was like his father?

There he was, sitting in front and rowing. Black beard, white teeth. Broad-shouldered, self-confident, always level-headed. Kirisk could never remember his father either shouting at him or else coddling him, like other fathers. And his eyes were indeed as clear and lustrous as ripe acorns.

Behind him, at the second pair of oars, sat Mylgun, his uncle, two years younger than his father. It was hard to believe that they were cousins, since Mylgun had hardly any beard at all. And what there was stuck out like a walrus's whiskers. In fact he looked like a walrus. He loved talking and arguing if something wasn't quite right. He never forgave an offence and he once got into a fight with an itinerant merchant. The whole tribe had to apologise and placate the merchant. But Mylgun wasn't having any of it; although small and round as a tree stump, he was bursting for a fight. "I'll show him what for," he said. He got drunk. He had a weakness for the bottle. Several of the men, Emrayin included, decided to tie him up, and he was a handful, as strong as a bear. He and Kirisk's father were friends, they always went hunting together because they would never let one another down and both were equally reliable. Mylgun had a son, still very small--he had only just learned to walk--and two older girls. Kirisk was their protector: let anyone dare lay a finger on them! And Kirisk's mother was very fond of Mylgun's girls; they often came over to play with Psulk.

But Muzluk was the prettiest of them all! It was a pity, they said, that when she grew up she would be given in marriage to neighbouring people. What if he took her and wouldn't let her go?

Over there, on the coast, Kirisk seldom thought

about such matters, but now, at a distance, everything commonplace acquired a hitherto unknown and touching significance. He suddenly very much wanted to go back home where, behind Piebald Dog, in the river valley, on the fringe of the forest, was his home village, an ancient site inhabited by his people, the Nivkhi of the coast, the tribe of the Fish Woman. He wanted to be with his mother so very badly at that moment that his heart ached. But they were such a long way away from their native coast, from their native Piebald Dog that was forever running on its own affairs along the shore of the eternal sea. Kirisk involuntarily even looked back over his shoulder as if to reassure himself and, as he looked round, he saw something entirely unexpected.

A dense grey wall of mist, covering almost half the horizon, was advancing towards them over the sea in the form of two broad, converging tongues. It was approaching visibly, swirling mightily over the black surface of the waters, gradually filling all the surrounding space. It was approaching like a living creature, like a monster with the inexorable purpose of seizing them and swallowing them up with the boat and with all the visible and invisible world. It was coming from the exact direction where Kirisk had seen something vague, a kind of grey mass lying still in the sea, and had taken it for an island. Now this whole mass, swelling and mounting higher and higher before their eyes, was rolling straight towards them, soundlessly and irresistibly driven by the wind.

"Look! Look!" shouted Kirisk in fright.

All stared in horror. The boat began dancing on the waves, temporarily out of control. Then they heard the menacing noise of a great wave racing up from under the solid curtain of mist. It was coming at them like a breaker, with all the growing thunder of water in rebellion, simultaneously swelling, mounting and collapsing.

"Turn round!" yelled Organ frantically. "Bring the

bows round!"

No sooner had the rowers turned the boat round to face the wave when the first impact of the squall nearly capsized Organ's kayak. The wave swept past, leaving a turbulent sea in its wake, and at this point the mist came upon them. When its creeping edge was very close, they clearly saw with what sinister triumph, with what ominous inexorability that swirling, living murk was bearing down on them.

"Remember the wind direction! Remember the wind direction!" Organ managed to shout. The mist came down like an avalanche, and everything was immediately plunged into an abyss of impenetrable darkness. They went from one world into another in the twinkling of an eye. Everything vanished. From that moment on, there was neither sky, nor sea, nor boat. They couldn't even distinguish each other's faces. And from that moment they had no peace. The sea raged. The boat was at the mercy of the sea, hurled upwards one moment, flung down the next into the yawning trough between the waves. Their clothes became sodden and heavy. But the worst disaster was that in that dense mist they could see nothing around them, could see absolutely nothing at all and could not tell what was happening on the sea and what they ought to be doing about it. There was only one thing left, to struggle blindly, on the off-chance, to keep the kayak afloat by some means and not let it capsize. There could no longer be any question of steering it towards a particular point. The waves were carrying it at their unbridled caprice, there was no knowing in which direction, and there was no knowing how long this could last.

Kirisk had heard before of occasions when hunters had been lost at sea in bad weather, had disappeared forever, and then in general mourning the women and children had lit bonfires for many days on the slopes of Piebald Dog, hoping against all hope. But even then he was unable to imagine even approximately how

terrible and cruel it must be to perish on the open sea. Even less could he suppose that the mists could turn into such a menacing and ubiquitous enemy, those inoffensive, silent visitants in the wintertime whose appearance he loved so much, when the whole world, enchanted by a milky-white silence, was covered with a smooth white gauze, when earthly objects seemed to evaporate, hovering like phantoms midair, when the soul was overcome by an inexplicable eeriness and languor in expectation of some kind of fairy-tale vision. Spinning, sliding, dispersing and bunching up again, the dark swirls of mist, floating over the unleashed sea, suggested the movement of serpents...

Clinging tight to his seat, Kirisk convulsively pressed in his terror up against Organ's leg.

"Hold on to me! Hold on tight!" shouted Organ in his ear, and after that there was nothing more he could say or do for the boy.

None of them could alleviate his lot, for they were all equal before the face of the savage element. Even if Kirisk had screamed out, burst into tears and started calling for his father, Emrayin would not have budged from his seat, for the boat was only being kept afloat because he and Mylgun were desperately balancing it with their oars, anticipating the buffeting of the waves.

The waves were irresistibly sweeping the boat into the impenetrable darkness. Organ was still trying to steer with the rudder somehow so as to keep the craft on an even keel, but the further they went, the more violent the storm became.

It might have been midnight already. It was hard to determine the passing of the hours. They could only guess it was nightfall when the darkness became even more intense. And in that darkness, they had been waging incessant, exhausting, unequal struggle, with the outcome little short of hopeless. Even so, the Nivkhi held on for the time being; they never lost the desperate hope that perhaps the storm, would die

down as unexpectedly as it had begun, the mist would disperse, and then they could think of what to do next. At one point, that hope seemed about to be fulfilled. The storm seemed to begin abating, the pitching and tossing diminished, the splashing and spray quietened down. But it was still the same darkness around them, solid, pitch-black. The first to raise his voice over the din of the sea was Organ.

"It's me! Kirisk is with me! Can you hear me?"

"We can hear you! We're in our places!" said Emrayin hoarsely.

"Who remembered the wind?" shouted Organ.

"What's the sense of that?" shouted Mylgun bitterly.

The old man fell silent. Indeed, the wind direction meant nothing to them now. It would be hard to guess in which direction they had been carried, where they were, whether they were near to or far from the islands which could have given them their bearings. Perhaps they were going to be carried so far adrift that they would never find their islands. And he fell silent, oppressed by the gloom and the pitching and tossing. The great Organ fell silent in troubled reflection. The only thing they could regard as good luck was that they had missed the islands by the will of fate and had not been dashed to pieces on the rocky shores. But without islands and without stars, in the night and the mist they had no means whatever of obtaining a fix. Organ was powerless to say anything. Even so, he shouted after a time:

"The wind was *Tlangi-la* when we turned round!"

No one answered. The rowers didn't feel up to replying. And Organ fell silent again. Kirisk was shaking all over, huddled up at his feet. Then Organ warned the rowers:

"Kirisk and I are going to bale out, so you just keep it steady. "

He bent down to Kirisk, felt for him in the dark and said to him, once he had assured himself that the boy

was unharmed:

"Don't be scared, Kirisk. Let's bale out. Otherwise it'll be bad for us. We've got just one scoop, I've found it, so you take this dipper, it's better than nothing... Have you got hold of it? Take the dipper, I said..."

"Yes, Grandad, I've got it. Will it be like this long? I'm frightened."

"So am I," said the elder. "But we're men, and that's how it is for us."

"Shall we be drowned, Grandad?"

"No, we shan't. But if we are, it means that's the way it has to be. Anyway, come on, hold on to me with one hand and empty out the water with the other."

It was a good thing that Organ had pulled himself together and that, availing themselves of the brief respite, they were able to bale out the shipped water. And that was when, acting by sense of touch, Organ drew Kirisk's attention to the small cask from which they had drunk during the day.

"Kirisk," he said, taking him by the arm. "That's our water cask. Have you found it? Remember that whatever happens, you must look after that cask. Hold on to it, grip it tight but don't part with it. If anything happens, we'd do better to perish than be left without it. You understand me? Don't rely on anyone else... You hear me?"

It was a good thing he said that; it was a good thing that he had warned the boy about it. The warning was to come in useful very soon afterwards.

After a brief respite, the storm again began pitching and tossing the boat about. This time with even more violence and fury, as if availing itself of the cover of night and the helplessness of the human beings, who could see nothing in the dark and the mist. This time the waves crashed over them in a fresh transport of fury, truly as if to compensate for the brief lull. Organ's kayak began spinning and whirling round between the invisible waves, mercilessly hurled in all directions by the incessant buffeting. The boat was lashed with

spray and began to settle as it shipped water. However fast Organ worked with the scoop, crawling about on his hands and knees, it was impossible to try and bale out the water as it invaded them. Then came a bitter and despairing shout from the rowers, "Throw everything overboard! We're sinking! Throw everything overboard!"

Kirisk wept loudly in terror, but no one heard him and no one had time for him. The boy shrank into the corner at the helm, tightly pinning the cask down under him. He lay with his side on it, convulsively curled up and racked by sobbing. He remembered that this was the vital thing he must do whatever might happen. He realised that they were doomed, but even then he did what Organ the elder had told him to do--he saved the cask of water.

Something had to be done before it was too late. While Mylgun continued frenziedly plying the oars, trying with all his might to prevent the boat from capsizing, Organ and Emrayin jettisoned everything on board. There was no alternative. Both Winchesters flew into the sea, the harpoon, the coils of rope and all the other things, even Organ's tin kettle. Most difficult of all was the carcass of the seal. Soaked, heavy and slippery, it was unmanageable. They had to lift it up off the bottom of the boat and roll it over the side. They were having to get rid of the catch for which they had come to the uninhabited islands. Shouting and cursing, by dint of great exertions, they pushed the carcass in the cramped space of the boat up to gunwale and finally rolled it over the side. Even in that confusion and violent clash with the sea, they could feel the boat rock with relief as the seal went overboard. That may have saved the situation...

Organ came round first. In the white, lifeless void, he could not at first grasp where he was and what was the meaning of that blurred, impenetrable motionlessness all round him. It was the mist.

It was the Great Mist, silently, indivisibly and

unshakeably hovering at that time over the entire expanse of the ocean. The Great Mist was under a great spell...

When his eyes had accustomed themselves somewhat, Organ could see the outlines of the boat, then those of the human beings. Emrayin and Mylgun were lying in their places near the oars. Cruelly battered by the storm in the night, they were lying in strange attitudes, as if they had been struck down on the spot, and only a loud, and intermittent snoring testified that they were alive. Kirisk was curled up at Organ's feet and was clinging tight to the cask. He was chilled to the marrow with damp and cold. Organ felt sorry for him, but could not help him in any way.

Stunned by the night he had just been through, Organ was sitting in the stern, his white head bowed. The old man's body was sore and aching all over. His long, knotted arms hung limply down at his sides. Organ had endured all kinds of disasters and tribulations in his time, but he had never known anything as cruel as this. He could not imagine where they were just now, where the storm had driven them, how far they were from land, or whether they were at sea or in the ocean itself. He could not even imagine what time of day or night it was. It was impossible to tell one from the other in the solid, impenetrably motionless presence of the mist. But in all probability, since storms usually die down by morning, it was daytime, and possibly afternoon.

Be that as it may, even rejoicing that by some miracle they were still alive, Organ had cause to feel dejected. Deprived of all they had brought with them, even the rifles, bartered from itinerant merchants for hundreds of sable-pelts, they were now left in a boat with two pairs of oars and a broached cask of fresh water.

Of course, as soon as the rowers came to, they would think about their predicament and about what to do next. But who was to say which direction they

should take? That was the first thing. Secondly, if they waited until night and the sky was not overcast, they could try to get their bearings from the stars. But how long would they have to row? How much energy and time would it take? Would they make it?

And the mist--what sort of mist was it? It was hanging dense and motionless over the sea, as if it had settled there for all time. Was it like this everywhere? Was the whole world plunged into a mist like this?

He wanted a smoke and a drink of water. It was, however, no use bothering about the smoke. What tobacco he had left was sodden. He couldn't find what had happened to his pipe. And the water? And the food? Organ was afraid to think about it. For the time being, he could bear it, and for the time being he need not think...

There was an oily swell on the sea, total peace, a lull. The boat was only rocking slightly where it lay. It was not being drawn anywhere and was not moving. The oars, left overboard, were lying helplessly on the surface. He could understand Emrayin and Mylgun: they had reached such a limit of exhaustion that they had been unable to lift them aboard. The rowers had collapsed and were sleeping like the dead.

With not a breath of wind stirring, everything was suspended in gloom and motionlessness. The sea was still, the mist was still, the boat was still, there was no need to hurry... there was nowhere to head for...

Sadly hunched up, the old man imperceptibly dozed off and was woken up by Kirisk.

"Grandad, Grandad! " said the boy, nudging him. "We're thirsty."

Organ started and realised that his three fellow-tribes folk expected him to act, for he was the elder, and he realised that the most terrible thing of all was about to begin--the sharing out of the water.

The mist still hung there, dense and unmoving. The sea was completely becalmed.

For the rest of the day, they rowed slowly through

the mist. Aimlessly, without knowing where they were bound.

After the men had come to and assessed their position, it was no longer possible to stay at rest.

And they rowed on. Perhaps drawing nearer to land, but perhaps moving away from it.

Even so, there was an illusion of movement.

They placed all their hopes on the mist dispersing and then the situation would be clearer.

In any case, it would be possible to see the stars at night if the mist dispersed. They must go by the stars at all costs. And there was still the hope that they would come to an island. Then it would be easier for them to get their bearings.

They carried on for the time being into nowhere.

Organ nevertheless instilled a certain order in the boat. They baled out all that remained of the water in the bottom of the kayak so that it wouldn't slop about under their feet. He put Kirisk beside him in the stern so that the boy would be warmer at his side and could dry out more quickly. He shared out the water equally. The first time he allowed each a one quarter of a dipperful. After the stormy night, it was essential for them to slake their thirst at least once. But Organ warned them that from now on they would only drink when he found it necessary, and only as much as he poured out. And for greater conviction, he shook the cask: it already sounded half empty.

There was one unexpected joy: when they began pouring out the water, behind the cask, in the very corner of the stern, under the seat, they found a sealskin bag containing dried fish. The big bag containing the food had been jettisoned with the other things, but this little bag, packed for the journey by Mylgun's wife, had accidentally been left in its place because it had been lying under the seat behind the cask which Kirisk had been told to save at all costs. True, there was plenty of seawater in the bag and it was impossible to put the fish in your mouth; it was so

permeated with brine, having been salty enough to begin with. Still, it was food. If there had been sufficient drinking water, that fish would have certainly come in useful.

But no one ate any of it for the time being, afraid of acquiring a thirst...

All were waiting for one thing, for the mist to clear...

The only sound in the silence was the dismal creaking of the rowlocks. Amid the great silence, the noise resembled the weary prayers and groans of a man who had lost his way. Where am I, where am I? Where am I to go now?

All were waiting for one thing, for the mist to clear...

But it didn't clear--nothing of the kind. It never stirred. It was as if the whole wide world--Land, Sky and Sea--had been swallowed up by something unimaginably monstrous, by a kind of other substance, something chill and dank that was not of this earth.

Another night fell in the womb of the mist. This could be told from the blackness descending on them. And no stars or sky above.

To sail somewhere solely for the sake of sailing was pointless.

They waited, yearned, hoped for the stars to appear in the sky. They waited hour after hour. They waited for a breeze to spring up that would drive that hateful, thrice-accursed mist away. They did not sleep. With prayer they begged the Spirit of the Sky to open the starry vault, with prayer they invoked the Lord of the Winds, a hairy beast with a shaggy mane, that he might wake up beyond the sea.

But it was all to no avail. No one heard their appeals and the mist did not disperse.

Kirisk also was waiting for the stars to appear. Those stars, usually glittering in the sky like toys, were more necessary than anything else. The boy had been shaken and terrified by what he had experienced the

evening before. It took little for a child's spirit to despair, to be broken, to be crushed forever. But the three grown-ups in the same boat, though in common deadly peril, when, it seemed, the end of their voyage was approaching, had held out, had prevailed over the infuriated elements, and this instilled in him a hope that this time, too, the road to salvation would be found. He very much believed that if only the stars appeared in the sky, it would mean an end to their sufferings.

If only it would happen sooner, then the sooner they could go back to land and Piebald Dog, because he was very hungry and thirsty, and was getting hungrier and thirstier all the time. He desperately yearned to go home to his mother, his relatives, the dwellings, the smoke of the fires, the streams and the grasses...

The victims suffered in expectation all night, but nothing changed: the mist never stirred, the stars did not come out in the sky, the sea remained in darkness.

All night they felt cold and damp, but above all they were very thirsty. Kirisk could imagine that only he was so terribly thirsty, but the others were suffering too.

But Organ gave out no water when Kirisk asked for a little nevertheless.

"No," he said firmly, "not now. Have patience."

If Organ had only known how thirsty they were after the fish which Kirisk, his father and Mylgun had begun chewing towards the end of the day. Although they had washed the fish down with water, it had not been enough and they had felt even more thirsty after a time. Organ never touched the fish, but he didn't drink any water either, saving it and not even allowing himself a mouthful. That day, all except Organ had drunk water twice, in the morning and in the evening. They had drunk very little in the evening, only enough to cover the bottom of the dipper. And the water in the cask was getting less and less.

Kirisk wanted to drink, and drink, and drink; he was

tired of hoping and waiting.

And so it lasted all night... The motionless mist hung there all night and the sea never stirred...

There were no changes in the morning. Except that it was a little brighter and the grey-brown depths of the mist had thinned slightly. It was now possible to see faces and eyes. For several yards around the boat there was the dull, silvery glitter of the lifeless sea, that seemed as solid as mercury. Kirisk had never seen water so still.

No breeze and no changes.

But that morning, the boy was struck by the difference in the faces of the grown-ups. They were very drawn and overgrown with a stiff stubble, their eyes were without lustre and were ringed with dark circles, as if they had succumbed to a fatal disease. Even his father, so strong and confident, had changed greatly. All that was left was his beard. His lips were bitten black. He was looking at Kirisk with pity, although he was not saying anything. Organ had aged particularly. His shoulders were bowed, his hair was even whiter, his neck with the bulging Adam's apple was stretched out even further and his eyes were rheumier than ever. Only his gaze showed what made him Organ. The wise, stern look of the elder still hinted at something significant, familiar and accessible to him alone.

They began the day with the most painful business of all, the sharing out of a few mouthfuls of water. Organ himself doled them out. Tucking the cask under his arm, he poured a fine trickle on to the bottom of the dipper to Kirisk first. Kirisk could hardly wait. His teeth rattled on the rim of the dipper and, as he swallowed the water, the fire within him was damped and subdued for only a moment and his head rang with excitement. But, as he handed back the dipper, the fire blazed up as before and even worse, as if a wild animal was being tormented inside him. Then Mylgun drank. Then Emrayin. It was terrible to watch them drinking.

They seized the dipper with shaking hands and handed it back without looking Organ in the eye. As if he was to blame for them getting so little. But when it was Organ's turn for a drink, he didn't pour himself a single drop. He silently pushed the spigot home. This seemed incredible to Kirisk. If he'd been holding the cask himself, he would have poured himself a dipperful, then drunk more and more until he fell down. Then come what may. Just to drink his fill, if only once. But old Organ was refusing his share. He was refusing water on the bottom of the dipper.

"Why's that, Grandad? Pour out for yourself the same as for everybody!" said Emrayin hoarsely. "You didn't drink yesterday either. If we're going to die, let's all die together!"

"I'll get by," replied Organ calmly.

"No, that's wrong!" said Emrayin, raising his voice, and he added with irritation, "Then I shan't drink either! "

"There's nothing to drink in here. Why argue?" Organ grinned wryly as if to say, "How illogical you are!", slowly shook his head, uncorked the cask again, poured some water on to the bottom of the dipper and said, "Let Kirisk have this one on me."

The boy looked flustered and all were silent. Organ held out the dipper to him.

"Here, Kirisk, drink. Think nothing of it."

Kirisk was silent.

"Drink," said Mylgun.

"Drink," said Emrayin.

"Drink," said Organ.

Kirisk hesitated. Although dying of thirst and eager to empty those few swallows of water down his own throat, he knew he must not.

"No," he said, struggling with the consuming desire inside him. "No, Grandad, drink it yourself." And he felt giddy.

Organ's hand trembled at these words and he sighed heavily. His gaze softened and he looked

affectionately at the boy.

"I've drunk, oh, so much water in my time. But you have a long time to live yet before..." He did not finish. "You understand me, Kirisk? Drink, it's necessary, you must drink up, but don't worry about me. Here!"

And again, as he swallowed the water, only for a moment did the boy feel the fire within him dampened and subdued, and again, after the relief, he promptly wanted another drink. This time there was an aftertaste of water going bad. But it didn't bother him. Just so long as there was water, whatever it might be like, just so long as it was drinkable. But it was dwindling all the time...

"Well, what are we going to do?" said Organ, turning to his fellow tribesmen. "Are we going to row on?"

There was a long silence. All looked round them. But nothing else in the world existed apart from the impenetrable mist two yards from the boat.

"Where to?" said Emrayin, breaking the silence with a sigh.

"What d'you mean, 'Where to?' " said Mylgun, flaring up for some reason. "Let's row; better to do that than die just sitting here!"

"But what's the difference whether we row or not?" countered Emrayin. "What difference can it make in this mist, rowing into nowhere?"

"To hell with the mist!" shouted Mylgun even more defiantly. "To hell with it! Is that clear? We're going to row, and if not, I'll turn this damned kayak upside down and we'll all feed the fishes. You understand me, Emrayin the Beard? We're going to row. Understand?."

Kirisk was upset. He was ashamed for Uncle Mylgun. He was not behaving the way he should, for he was younger than his father. It meant that something had snapped, something had gone wrong with him or with what the four Nivkhi in the boat had become. All were silent, dejected and miserable. Even

Mylgun went quiet, though breathing heavily. Emrayin bowed his head. But Organ looked somewhere to one side, and his face was as impenetrable as the mist that surrounded them on all sides in a dense pall.

"Calm down, Mylgun," said Emrayin finally. "I didn't really mean it. We'd be better off rowing than just sitting here. You're right. Let's get moving."

And they started out. Again the rowlocks creaked, again the oars splashed as they rose and fell, and as before the quiet, unruffled water closed up behind the boat. However, they had the impression that they were not moving, but staying in the same place. However far forward they went, there was mist all round, as if they were in an enchanted circle. This must have been what made Mylgun lose his temper again.

"To hell with your mist, you hear, Emrayin the Beard?" he raged. "I want us to move faster! Get moving, row, don't sleep, you hear? To hell with your mist!"

So saying, Mylgun leaned heavily on his oars.

"Come on, row, row!" he demanded.

Emrayin avoided angering him but was goaded by his taunts and also joined in the senseless game.

The boat gained more and more speed. It sped flat out in spurts through the mist, there was no knowing where and no knowing why. Mylgun and Emrayin, not to be outdone by each other, went on rowing fiercely in a kind of wild frenzy, as if they could outstrip the mist and tear themselves free of its unconfined confines.

The oar-blades gleamed, throwing up oblique splashes of flying spray, the water gurgled along the sides, the faces of the rowers streamed with sweat as, teeth bared, they bent over to dip the oars and straightened up again as they pulled the blades through the water...

Breathe in, out, in, out... In, out, in, out...

Mist in front, mist behind, mist all round.

"Harder, harder!" Mylgun almost spat out the words as he furiously egged his cousin on.

At first Kirisk cheered up, surrendering himself to the illusion of motion, but then saw that it was fruitless and frightening. The boy looked in fear at Organ, expecting him to put a stop to this senseless race. But the elder seemed to be somewhere else: his pensive gaze had strayed to one side and there was a fixed, aloof expression on his face. Either the old man was weeping or his eyes were running; his face was wet. He sat motionless in the stern as if unaware of what was happening.

Still the boat sped on, driven through the mist, there was no knowing where and no knowing why...

"Harder, harder!" rang the desperate voice in the mist. "Harder, harder!"

This lasted for some time. But gradually the rowers lost speed as they tired and they soon lowered their oars, gasping noisily for breath. Mylgun sat with his head bowed low.

A bitter sobering-down set in. They had not outstripped the mist, they had not escaped beyond its bounds, everything was as before: an oily swell, total isolation and unrelieved, impenetrable gloom. Except that the boat drifted on for some time, turning round and round under its own impetus...

What had made them do that? To what end? And what would they have gained if they had stayed where they were? Likewise nothing.

Each was probably thinking along these lines. Then Organ said:

"Now listen to me." He enunciated the words slowly, perhaps in order to save his strength; he had not had anything to drink or eat for two days. "It may be," he reasoned, "that the mist will hold for many more days yet. There have been such years. There have been such cases. You know yourselves. For seven, eight and even ten days the mist hangs over the sea like a plague over the land, like a disease that won't go until its time is up. But what its time is, no one knows. If this mist is one of those, then we are at a grave pass.

There's only some dried fish left, and it's no use without water. And this is our water, see!" He shook the cask. The water slopped about no more than a few inches above the bottom.

All were silent. And the old man stopped speaking. It was clear to all what he wanted to say: they were to drink water only once a day, a share just covering the bottom of the dipper, to spin it out a little longer, if possible, so that they could hold out and survive, if possible, until the disastrous mist was gone. If the sea opened up before them, if the stars or the sun came out, then they would know where they were and they would be in luck: they might hold out till they reached land.

Yes, that was what it had come to. And there could be no other solution! It was easy to say hold on; but what a man's mind might accept was by no means always accepted by his flesh. They were suffering and they wanted to drink, not a few mouthfuls, but in quantity.

Organ realised the hopelessness of the position, and he was feeling it more badly than anyone. The old man was shrivelling up in front of their eyes. Furrowed with lines and wrinkles, his dark-brown face was turning blacker and harder every hour with the pain from within. A strained, feverish glitter had appeared in the streaming eyes; it was hard for the old man to make himself bear such sufferings. For the time being, however, he kept his spirits up, holding on the way a dying tree holds on to the root. However, this could not last long. It was essential to say everything that could be of the slightest importance for their salvation.

"I've been thinking," he continued, "that we must look at the air all the time and listen, in case an *agukuk* flies past. It's the only bird that travels over the sea in such weather. If we find ourselves between some island and the mainland, the flight of the *agukuk* can show us the way. Any bird on the open sea goes in a straight line only. It never turns, only straight on.

That goes for the *agukuk*. "

"And if we don't find ourselves between an island and the mainland?" asked Mylgun gloomily, still not raising his head.

"Then we won't see the bird," replied Organ calmly again.

Kirisk wanted to know why the *agukuk* should fly over the sea and out of what necessity; but Mylgun beat him to it.

"Supposing the *agukuk* forgets to fly over us, eh, Grandpa," he jeered, "and decides to fly to one side, somewhere over there, what then?"

"Then we shan't see it," replied Organ calmly again.

"So we shan't see it?" said Mylgun in amazement, turning nasty. "So we shan't see the *agukuk* anyway? Then what are we hanging about here for?" muttered Mylgun, turning even nastier. He laughed loudly, then fell silent. All felt uneasy. All were silent, not knowing what to do.

Meanwhile, Mylgun had had an idea. He knocked an oar out of its rowlock with the flat of his hand, then climbed up on to the bows for some reason and stood erect, balancing himself with the oar. No one said anything to him and he paid no attention to the others.

"Hey, you bitch!" he raged. "Hey you, Shaman of the Winds!" he shouted at the top of his voice into the misty darkness, shaking the oar threateningly. "If you're the Lord of the Winds and not some carrion fit for the dogs, then where are your winds? Have you conked out in your den, you bitch, or are the dogs of the whole world after you and you can't make up your mind which one to offer yourself to, or are you letting yourself be mounted by all of them in turn, you bitch, so that you haven't time to stir up the winds, or have you forgotten that we're stuck here in this deadly mist, same as in a hole? Or don't you know that we have a little one with us? He's thirsty, he wants water! Water, you understand? I tell you, we have a little one with us,

he's at sea for the first time! And look how you're treating him! Is that decent? Answer, if you're the Lord of the Winds, and not stinking seal shit! Send your winds! You hear? Tuck the mists under your tail. You hear me? Send a storm, you bitch, a most terrible storm--send Tlangila, you cur, overturn us in the sea, let the waves bury us, you mangy bitch! You hear? You hear me? I spit on you, I spit on you and I piss on your shaggy snout. If you are the Lord of the Winds, send us your storm, drown us in the sea, but if not, then you're the mangiest bitch, and I'm a dog, one more dog, only I won't make you, so up yours! Up yours, that's what I said, up yours!"

In this way did Mylgun hurl obscenities at the Shaman of the Winds who dwells no one knows where and who hides his subordinate winds no one knows where. For a long time yet, until he was hoarse and exhausted, did Mylgun shout and rave, jeering, reviling, yet appealing for wind to the Lord of the Winds.

Then he threw the oar violently into the sea and, sitting down in his place, suddenly covered his face with his hands and burst into a loud and terrible sobbing. All were helplessly silent while he choked on his sobs, calling out the names of his little children. Kirisk had never seen a man sob before; he began trembling with fright and turned to Organ with tears in his eyes.

"Grandad! Grandad! What's he doing that for, why is he crying?"

"Don't be afraid," said the old man, squeezing the boy's hand. "It'll pass. He'll stop soon. Just don't think about it. It's nothing to do with you. It'll pass."

And, indeed, Mylgun began gradually quietening down, but he did not take his face out of his hands and sat there with his shoulders twitching convulsively. Emrayin slowly paddled the boat up to the floating oar. He pulled it up to the boat with his own oar and fished it out and lifted it into its rowlock.

"Calm down, Mylgun," said Emrayin sympathetically. "You're right, it would be better to run into a storm than suffer in the fog. Let's wait a while and the sea might open up suddenly. There's nothing else we can do..."

Mylgun made no reply. He bowed his head lower and lower and sat hunched up like a lunatic who is afraid to look in front of him.

The mist hung as dispassionate and deadly as before over the ocean, hiding the world in a great, spellbound murk. Still no winds and no changes. However much Mylgun had cursed and abused the Shaman of the Winds, the spirit had remained deaf and indifferent to it all. He did not even fly into a rage; he never stirred; he did not send down a storm...

Emrayin rowed slowly with his pair of oars so as not to remain stationary and the boat glided almost imperceptibly over the water. Organ was silent; he had withdrawn into his thoughts; perhaps once again and, perhaps, for the last time in his life, he was thinking about his Fish Woman.

Kirisk distracted him from his gloomy old man's reflections.

"Grandad, Grandad, why does the *agukuk* fly to islands?" he asked quietly.

"I forgot to tell you. In such a big mist, only the *agukuk* can fly over the sea. The *agukuk* flies to the islands to go hunting, and sometimes it snatches up baby seals. The *agukuk* has eyes that can see in the mist and in the dark of night, as in day. That's because it's an owl. The biggest and strongest of the owls."

"I could do with such eyes," whispered Kirisk with dry lips. "I would look to see which way we should go, and we would quickly come to land and would drink, we'd drink ever so much and for a long time... I could do with such eyes..."

"Everyone has his own eyes," sighed Organ.

They fell silent. A little while later, as if returning to this conversation, Organ said, as he looked hard at the

boy's face, "Is it very hard for you? Just have patience. If you hold out, you'll be a great hunter. Have patience, my dear, don't think about water, think about something else. Don't think about water."

Kirisk obediently tried not to think about water. But it didn't work. The harder he tried, the more thirsty he felt. He was also so hungry that he even felt ill, and this made him want to howl to the whole world, like Mylgun.

That was how the day passed. They waited, hoping all the time that suddenly the noise of a wave would be heard in the distance, a fresh breeze would start up, it would drive the mist to the other end of the world and the road to salvation would be open. But silence reigned on the sea, such a motionless, deathly silence that their heads and ears ached. And all the time, without cease, they wanted a drink. It was monstrous: in the boundless ocean, they were dying of thirst.

Towards evening, Mylgun took ill. He did not talk at all and his eyes were blank. He had to be given a little water to moisten his throat. As he looked at Kirisk, whose eyes were riveted on the dipper, Organ could not help pouring some for him too, and then some for Emrayin as well. But he never took a drop for himself. This time, putting the cask with what was left of the water under the bench, he sat unmoving for a long time, concentrating in a new way, serene and absorbed in remote, lofty thoughts, as if he was not experiencing any thirst or other torments of the flesh. He sat in the stern, silent, unruffled, like a solitary hawk on a mountain peak. He already knew what lay ahead of him, and so he summoned up his courage, was harbouring the remains of his strength before the last deed of his lifetime. He very much missed his pipe. The old man wanted to light up and enjoy a few puffs before the end while he was thinking his thoughts about her, about his Fish Woman...

Where are you swimming, Great Fish Woman?

He knew himself, he knew how much strength and worth he had on the threshold of the Limit. The only thing that deterred him from his plan for the time being was Kirisk, who had become so attached to him during these days and who had been snuggling up to him all the time for protection and warmth. He felt sorry for the boy. But it was for his sake that Organ must take the next step...

So ended that long, joyless and last day in the life of Organ the elder.

Evening was already falling. Another night was on the way.

But during that night, too, the weather stayed unchanged as before. The mist on the sea remained in the same state of unruffled inertness. And again there was that dense evening darkness, and after it there would be an impossibly long, unbearable, eerie night. If only a wind rose suddenly in the middle of the night, or a storm, or anything else, just so long as the sky opened up and it was possible to see the stars! However, the night promised nothing; there was no sign of waves on the water or movement in the air: everything was still in interminable darkness and interminable gloom. The solitary boat, lost in the murk with three men and a boy on board dying of hunger and thirst, went slowly round and round in the mist, hopelessly lost and doomed...

Kirisk did not remember just when he fell asleep. He dozed for a long time, racked by intolerable thirst. It seemed that there would never be an end to the torments that were devouring him alive. All he needed was water. Only water, nothing else. The feeling of hunger gradually became dulled, like a muted pain that has withdrawn inside; but his thirst became even fiercer. And there was no means of allaying it.

Kirisk remembered how, in his childhood, when he once fell seriously ill and lay in a hot sweat, he felt just as bad and was desperately thirsty. His mother never left his bedside and kept applying a wet cloth to his blazing forehead, wept on the quiet and kept whispering something. In the faint light of the oil lamp, in the shimmering twinkling haze, his mother's anxious face kept bending over him. His father was away at sea, and Kirisk wanted his mother to give him something to drink and his father to come back as soon as possible. But neither desire was fulfilled. His father was far away and his mother did not give him a drink. She said that he mustn't drink on any account. She kept moistening his parched lips with a cloth, but this only alleviated his sufferings for a

moment. And again he felt thirsty, and his thirst became intolerable.

His mother implored him not to drink water saying that he must bear it and then the illness would pass.

"Be patient, dear!" she said. "You'll feel better by morning. Just keep saying to yourself, 'Little blue mouse, give me water' and you'll feel better, just you see. Ask the blue mouse, dear, let it come running to you and bring you water... Only you must ask it nicely..."

That night, as he battled with his thirst, he whispered the spell, expecting that the blue mouse really would run up and offer him water... He kept imploring the blue mouse, "Little blue mouse, give me water! Little blue mouse, give me water!" Then he became feverish, tossing and turning in his delirium. And he kept asking, "Little blue mouse, give me water!" It was a long time before it appeared, but he kept whispering, calling it, weeping and asking, "Little blue mouse, give me water!" In the end, it ran up. The little blue mouse was as cool and elusive as a breeze over a brook in the forest at midday. It was hard to see it, since it was all pale-blue and aethereal, and it fluttered like a butterfly. The mouse, fluttering, touched his face, his neck and his body with its soft skin and thereby brought him relief. Apparently, it gave him water to drink, and he drank for a long time without quenching his thirst, and the water kept coming, gurgling round him, splashing over his head... In the morning he woke up with a bright, light sensation in his soul; he was better, but much weakened. For a long time the boy remembered that little blue water-carrier mouse that had come to give him water and cure him in the night when he was feeling very bad....

He remembered this now as he burned with thirst in the boat. If only the little blue mouse would appear again! And with poignant sadness and grief he thought at that hour of his mother who had given him hope with the little blue water-carrier mouse. He remembered how his mother had bent over him when he could hardly breathe and he had been so thirsty. He remembered the sad, tearful devotion on her face and the alarm and readiness with which she had done everything she possibly could; he remembered how she had looked at him prayerfully and with hidden fear. How was she now? Anguished, weeping, waiting somewhere on the seashore?. The sea would tell her nothing. And no one had the power to help her in her plight. Except that the women and children

were probably burning bonfires on the slopes of Piebald Dog and trying to comfort her; it could still end well and those lost at sea might suddenly appear by the shore.

Meanwhile they were slowly turning round and round and the boat in a lifeless, pitch-black void, their last hopes of rescue slowly fading in the gloom of the night mist. No, the forces were too unequal: the darkness of eternity that had existed before the Sun appeared in the Universe, and the four doomed beings in the frail craft... Without water, without food, without guiding stars in the ocean...

Never before had Kirisk seen such black blackness in the world and never had he supposed during his short life that the torments of unassuaged thirst could be so cruel. In order to get a grip on himself somehow, Kirisk started thinking about the little blue water-carrier mouse that had once brought him relief by giving him water and curing him...

"Little blue mouse, give me water!" He began tirelessly whispering the wonderful spell that his mother had taught him: "Little blue mouse, give me water! Little blue mouse, give me water!" And although the miracle never happened, he continued praying fervently and calling for the blue mouse. It had now become his hope as a magic spell against thirst.

Little blue mouse, give me water!

As he repeated this again and again, trying to distract himself, the boy dozed off and woke up by turns, involuntarily overhearing in his sleep snatches of a conversation between Organ and Emrayin. They were talking at length and quietly about something. It was a strange, incomprehensible conversation, with long pauses, with unfinished and sometimes incoherent phrases. Kirisk distinctly heard what Organ was saying, since he was nestling under the old man's side; the old man spoke with an effort, breathing heavily, but stubbornly fighting the hoarseness and the rattle in his throat. Kirisk could not understand his father so easily, however; he was a little further away, at his oars.

"It's not for me to give you lessons, but just think, Grand," said Emrayin heatedly in a whisper, as if someone might overhear them. "After all, you're a clever man. "

"I've thought about it, I've thought hard, and it'll be better that way," replied Organ, evidently still holding to his opinion.

They were silent for a short while, and then Emrayin said, "We're all in the same boat, we should meet with the same fate."

"Fate, fate," muttered the old man bitterly. "We know you can't escape your fate," he said with a husky catch in his voice, "but that's what fate's about: give in if you want, don't give in if you don't want. If we're done for, one of us can hurry up his own fate so that the others can have more time. Think about it: supposing the way opens ahead of you, you're rowing away and land's already in sight and you're short of a few gulps of water to stay alive long enough to make it."

Emrayin answered with something incomprehensible, and both fell silent.

Kirisk was trying to fall asleep and he kept calling on his little blue mouse. He thought it might appear when he was asleep. But sleep would not come.

Little blue mouse, give me water!

"How's Mylgun over there?" asked Organ.

"Same as before, just lying there," replied Emrayin.

"Lying there, you say." After a pause, the old man said reminiscently, "When he wakes up, tell him this."

"Very well." Emrayin's voice trembled as he spoke and he cleared his throat with an effort. "I'll tell him everything you say."

"Tell him I respected him. He's a great hunter. And not a bad man. I always respected him."

He was silent again.

Little blue mouse, give me water!

Then Emrayin said something that Kirisk couldn't quite catch, and Organ replied:

"No, I can't wait. Can't you see? My strength's running out. A good dog dies away from the rest. I'm the same. I was a great man! I know it. I always used to dream of the Fish Woman. It's not for you to understand... I want to go there..."

They talked about something else. Kirisk dozed off, calling for the water-carrier mouse.

Little blue mouse, give me water!

The last thing he heard was his father moving closer to Organ and saying:

"Remember how the merchants came on reindeer to barter axes and other things? And the big Red one said that in some faraway country there was a great man who walked on the sea. So there used to be such people..."

"Then he must have been a very great person, the greatest of the greatest," replied Organ. "But our greatest is the Fish Woman."

Kirisk was already asleep, but a few words vaguely reached his consciousness.

"Wait. Think it over..."

"It's time. I've lived my time... Don't hold me back. My strength is going, I can't take it any more..."

"Such darkness..."

"What's the difference?"

"I haven't finished saying what I want to tell you..."

"Words don't end. They don't end even after us."

"Such darkness..."

"Don't keep me back. My strength's going. And I want to do it myself..."

"Such darkness..."

"You'll hold out a little longer. There's still some water left in there..."

Someone's big, coarse, broad hand fumbled its way to the little boy's head and rested carefully on it. Kirisk realised, though half-asleep, that it was Organ's hand. Warm and massive, it rested for a while on his head, as if wishing to protect it and commit it to memory...

Kirisk dreamed that he was walking on the sea. He was going towards where there should be land so that he could quench his thirst. He stepped along without falling in or drowning. What he saw around him was weird and wonderful. The pure, resplendent sea stretched as far as the eye could see. Apart from the sea, apart from the waters of the sea, nothing else in the world existed. Only the sea and only the water. And he was walking on that water as if on solid ground. The waves rolled smoothly under the sun from everywhere, from all directions. It was impossible to tell where the waves were coming from or where they were going.

He was stepping over the sea in total solitude. At first it

seemed to him that he had run ahead of Organ, Emrayin and Mylgun so as to find water sooner and call them. Then he realised that he was here in total solitude. He shouted and called them, but no one answered. Not a soul, not a sound, not a shadow... He did not know where they had vanished to. This terrified him. He was shouting to no avail. And no land was to be seen anywhere, not in any direction. He began running over the sea, panting for breath, using up his strength, but he was not getting nearer to anything, he stayed in the same place, his thirst became more and more unbearable. And then he saw a bird flying over him. It was Luvr the Duck. She was crying out as she sped over the sea in search of a nesting-place. But she could not find a patch of dry land anywhere. Only the incessant waves splashing all round. Luvr the Duck moaned piteously as she flew along.

"Luvr the Duck!" shouted Kirisk to her. "Where's land, which way does it lie? I'm thirsty!"

"There isn't any land in the world yet, not anywhere!" replied Luvr the Duck. "Nothing anywhere but waves."

"And where are the others?" asked the boy.

"Nowhere, don't look for them, they're nowhere," answered Luvr the Duck.

Words could not describe the uncanny feeling of loneliness and misery that came over Kirisk. He wanted to run away from there, but there wasn't anywhere he could run to, there was only the water and the waves advancing on him from all directions. Luvr the Duck was vanishing into the distance, dwindling to a black dot.

"Luvr the Duck, take me with you, don't leave me! I'm thirsty!" implored the boy.

But she did not answer and soon vanished beyond the horizon in search of land that did not yet exist. And the sun was blinding his eyes.

He woke up in tears, still whimpering and suffering under the burden of inescapable sorrow and fear. He slowly opened eyes that were full of tears and realised that he had been dreaming. The boat was rocking slightly on the sea. The grey, misty gloom hung over them and surrounded them on all sides. This meant that night had passed and morning was near. He stirred.

"Grandad, I'm thirsty, I've had a dream," he murmured and reached out for Organ. His hand found nothing. Organ's place in the stem was empty.

"Grandad!" called Kirisk. No one answered. The boy lifted

his head and shuddered.

"Grandad, Grandad, where are you?"

"Don't shout!" said Emrayin, moving up to him at once. He embraced his son and pressed him tightly to his breast. "Don't shout, Grandad's gone! Don't call him! He's gone to the Fish Woman."

But Kirisk ignored him. "Where's my Grandad? Where? Where's my Grandad?"

"Listen to me! Don't cry! Calm down, Kirisk, he's not with us any more," his father tried to explain. "Only don't cry. He said I was to give you water. We still have some left. You just stop crying and I'll give you a drink. Only don't cry. The mist will go soon and then you'll see..."

Kirisk was inconsolable, frantically trying to wrench himself free of his father's grasp. His sudden movements set the boat rocking. Emrayin was at a loss what to do.

"We're going to start moving now! Look, we're going to move! Hey, Mylgun, get up, get up, I said! Let's get moving!"

Mylgun started rowing. The boat began gliding slowly over the water. And again they sailed off into nowhere for no reason through dense, milky mist that had blotted out the whole wide world. That was how they met the new day. There were now three of them in the boat.

Little blue mouse, give me water!

When Kirisk had calmed down a little, Emrayin took his place at the oars again and they set off with four oars a little faster, but again there was no knowing where or why. Shaken by Organ's disappearance, Kirisk was still weeping bitterly, sitting forlornly in the stern. His father and Mylgun were also dejected, but could do nothing to help themselves or the boy. All they could do was to take to the oars. They rowed on just for the sake of rowing. Their faces were black in the white mist. An inexorable, cruel death by starvation and thirst hung over them all.

They were silent and did not speak about anything. They were afraid to talk. After a while, Mylgun let go of the oars.

"Share out the water!" he said grimly to Emrayin.

Emrayin poured each of them several mouthfuls from the cask into the bottom of the dipper. The water was bad, with an unpleasant smell and a rotten flavour. But even of that there was only very little left. They could share it out another

three or four times, but no more. No one had had enough, and no one felt better for the drink.

And again they were overcome by a troubled, benumbing sense of expectation. Was the weather going to change or not? Nobody was making hopeful suggestions any more. Weakened and exhausted, they succumbed to indifference, meekly awaiting their fate, aimlessly circling round and round through the deadly mist. All they could do now was reconcile themselves to their fate. The mist was oppressing and crushing their will more and more. Only once, swearing violently, did Mylgun say in a voice trembling with hatred:

"If only the mist cleared, I'd be ready to die! I'd throw myself out of the boat. If only I could set eyes on my homeland!"

Emrayin said nothing and did not even turn his head. What was there to say? He now had the elder's place in the boat. But there was nothing he could suggest. There was nowhere to go!

Time passed. The boat was drifting of its own accord, alternately stopping and moving off again.

And with each hour the threat to their lives grew greater: cruel, destructive hunger was being added to their unrelenting thirst. Their strength was ebbing away.

Kirisk lay in the stern with his eyes half-closed. His head was feeling heavier and heavier; it was going round and round, and he was finding it hard to breathe. His empty stomach kept heaving. And he felt thirsty all the time. Oh, how thirsty he was!

Little blue mouse, give me water!

As he invoked the blue water-carrier mouse, the boy tried to fall into oblivion, seeking salvation in memories of the life which had been left behind at the foot of Piebald Dog and which was now inaccessible and belonged to the world of fairy-tales.

"Little blue mouse, give me water!" whispered his lips and because his head was spinning, he imagined himself playing, rolling down the grassy hill like a log. Oh, that was great fun! Kirisk was the nimblest and the toughest at it. You have to run up the steep slope and roll downhill from there, rolling over and over like a barked log sent down a slope. You have to keep your arms tightly pressed to your body. First, you must push yourself off to get moving. You turn over once, twice, three times, but once you're going you can't stop

yourself. You laugh and you shout with pleasure, and the sky tilts one way and then another, the clouds spin round and flicker past your eyes, the trees spin round and fall over, everything flies head over heels, and the sun in the sky bursts his sides laughing. And the other children are shouting and screaming round you. You roll down and down, turning over and over faster and faster, and you catch such funny glimpses of the peering faces or bent knees of the children bounding along after you until finally you stop. Oooh! Nothing but a noise in your ears! And this is the most difficult moment. Before a count of one, two, three, you have to jump up to your feet and not fall down again with giddiness. Everybody usually falls at the first attempt. It's so funny! They all laugh, and you laugh too. You want to stay on your feet, but the ground slides from under them. But Kirisk didn't use to fall. He kept on his feet. He tried hard. For Muzluk was always beside him. He didn't want to fall over in front of her like just any weakling.

But the best and funniest thing was when he and Muzluk chased one another as they rolled downhill. Girls can roll too. Only they're cowards and they can get their plaits caught in something. But that doesn't count. You can't get away without a few bruises when you're having such fun.

And when he and Muzluk rolled down together, Kirisk deliberately stuck out his elbows a little way without anyone noticing so as not to overtake her. They used to roll to the bottom, with all the others shouting and laughing. Then they would jump to their feet together before the count of three was up, and no one ever guessed what bliss it was to support Muzluk and help her stay on her feet. They would embrace to hold each other up. Muzluk would laugh so merrily and her lips were so inviting. She would seem about to fall and Kirisk would have to keep her steady, holding her up and embracing her. No one ever guessed what moments of unknown happiness and frightening love they experienced then. The heart of a little girl beat wildly under the thin frock. Their bodies touched. and Kirisk would become aware of tiny budding, taut breasts under his arm. How she would tremble and snuggle quickly up to him, and how enigmatic and lustrous were her eyes, intoxicated with giddiness. The whole world, everything that there was on earth and in heaven, spun round with them, revelling in their ceaseless laughter and joy. No one ever guessed what wonderful happiness was theirs! But once a cousin of his, slightly older, a nasty, contemptible boy started staggering like a fool up against Muzluk as if he

was too giddy to stand up. Muzluk would run away from him, but he pretended that he was too dizzy to stay on his feet; he would run after her and fall up against her. Kirisk had a fight with him. The other boy was bigger than him and knocked him down several times. But it still came to a draw; Kirisk refused to surrender and would not let Muzluk intercede for him. But that happened only once...

And then there were the delightful moments when, after they had played enough, hot and sweating, they would run to the brook for a drink of water.

Little blue mouse, give me water!
Ok, little blue mouse, give me water!

The stream wasn't far away. It came out the forest and flowed to the place where they used to play. The water gurgled over the stones, preserving in its course the forest's gloom and the forest's coolness. The grasses, crowding round, came up to the very edge of the running water. The ones that grew at the edge were washed by the stream, their trailing stems resisting the flow of the joyful current. And the stream ran blithely towards the sea, glittering sharply in the sun, diving under the steep, overhanging bank or disappearing into clumps of weeds and willows.

They ran to the stream together and together flopped down at the water's edge, pushing the grasses aside. They had no time to wash their hands and scoop water up in their cupped palms, but drank like reindeer, hanging their heads down to dip their faces into the bubbling, affectionately tickling stream. What bliss it was!

Little blue mouse, give me water!
Little blue mouse, give me water!
Ok, little blue mouse, give me water!..

They lay on the bank, their heads hanging down to the water. Their shoulders were close together and their hands, lowered into the swift current, melted into one another as if they had a common pair of hands. They drank, taking the water in with their lips, with pauses for breath, blissfully quenching their thirst, fooling about, blowing bubbles in the water. They didn't want to go, they didn't want to lift their heads from the pure water in which they were viewing their

own fast-flowing, elusive reflections, smiling at their comically distorted images and then smiling at one another.

Little blue mouse, give me water!
Little blue mouse, give me water!
Little blue mouse, give me water!
Ok, little blue mouse, give me water!

Without lifting her face from the stream, Muzluk looked at him, slyly out of the comer of her oblique eye, and he looked back at her in the same way and just as slyly. She nudged him with her shoulder, as if pushing him away, but he didn't budge. Then she filled her mouth with water and blew it in his face. He did the same: he filled his mouth with even more water and blew a strong jet in hers. And that was the beginning of a wild chase. They dashed through the water, spraying each other as much as they could and, soaked through from head to foot, shrieking and laughing, rushed up and down the stream...

Little blue mouse, give me water!

It was hard for Kirisk to realise that this would never happen again. His breathing became worse, his stomach was racked with spasms. He wept softly and writhed slowly with pain, still appealing to the same blue mouse:

Little blue mouse, give me water!

He lay there, trying to forget himself in daydreams. And nothing changed around him. The white pall of mist still hung motionless over them. They lay helpless where they were, and there was still no knowing what lay ahead for them. Suddenly, the boat lurched violently and he heard his father cry out in fear, "Mylgun! Mylgun! What are you doing? Stop!"

Kirisk lifted his head and was shaken. Mylgun had leaned over the side and was scooping up sea water and drinking it out of the dipper.

"Stop!" Emrayin rushed over to him, intending to snatch the dipper away from him, but Mylgun made a threatening

move.

"Don't come near me, Emrayin the Beard! I'll kill you!"

It is unthinkable to drink that bitter brine, but Mylgun was doing just that, choking as he forced himself to drink it down, baring his teeth like a wild animal, clutching the dipper with shaking hands and spilling the water all over his chest and his clothing.

Then he dashed the dipper down on to the bottom of the boat and threw himself on his back, wheezing and gasping for breath. He just lay like that, and there was no way of helping him at all. Kirisk curled up into a ball out of terror, feeling even more thirsty and racked by even more violent stomach cramps. Emrayin, his head bowed, took to the oars again and quietly rowed the boat in to the mist. There was nothing else he could do.

Mylgun would lie still or suddenly begin shuddering convulsively again, gasping his life away in another fit of thirst. However, he lifted his head after a while.

"Burning, everything's burning inside!" And he started tearing the shirt on his chest.

"Tell me, what am I to do? How can I help you? There's still some in there." Emrayin nodded towards the cask. "Shall I pour you some?"

"No," said Mylgun. "Not now. I wanted to hold out till night and then go like Grandad, but I didn't hold out. So be it. Otherwise I'd do something desperate; I'd drink up all the water. But I'm done for now, and I'm going away. I'm done for now... I still have the strength..."

In the wilderness of the sea, in the accursed mist which was without end, it was utterly terrifying to listen to the words of a man who had condemned himself to a slow death. Emrayin tried somehow to calm his cousin and friend, to say something to him, but the other would not listen; he was in a hurry, he had decided to put an end to his agony at one stroke.

"Don't say anything, Emrayin, it's too late!" muttered Mylgun like a maniac. "I've made up my mind. I'm going of my own free will. As for you two, father and son, decide for yourselves. It'll be better that way. Forgive me that it's come to this. You two stay on; there's still a little water... But I'm going over the side now..." And with these words, Mylgun stood up and bent over, holding on to the side of the boat. Staggering, summoning up all his strength. Mylgun said to Emrayin, glaring at him from under his eyebrows:

"Don't try to stop me, Emrayin the Beard! It's got to be this way. Don't try to stop me. Goodbye. You might make it. I'm going to do it now... You row fast away from here at once... At once, and don't wait... If you come near me, I'll tip you over. Now row, Emrayin the Beard, row as hard as you can. You hear me? Or I'll tip you over...

There was nothing Emrayin could do but obey Mylgun's threats and entreaties. The boat moved off in a straight line, cleaving the soundless mist and the soundless water. Kirisk began sobbing piteously:

"Uncle Mylgun! Uncle Mylgun! Don't!"

Just at that moment, Mylgun rolled over the side. The boat listed violently and straightened out again.

"Go away! Go away!" yelled Mylgun as he floundered in the icy water.

The mist hid him from view at once. Everything went quiet, and then in the ringing silence a voice was heard once more, the last cry of a drowning man! At this point, Emrayin couldn't bear it any longer.

"Mylgun! Mylgun!" he called and, sobbing, he turned the boat round. They soon returned, but there was no Mylgun. The surface of the water was as blank and calm as if nothing had happened at all. It was impossible to find the spot where the man had gone down.

They spent the rest of the day circling around without leaving. Devastated and crushed with grief, they both wept. It was the first time in his life that Kirisk had seen his father weep. Nothing like that had ever happened to him before.

"Well, we're alone now," muttered Emrayin, wiping the tears off his beard. Mylgun, my faithful Mylgun!" he whispered, sobbing.

Day was already approaching its end. So it seemed. If a sun existed somewhere, if it was moving across the sky over the seas and the mists, then it must have been sinking quietly down to its resting-place. But here, under the dense and gradually darkening pall as it fed on the sinister gloom, a solitary boat was circling round on the sea, a boat that was totally cut off from the world and in which only two people were left, a father and his son.

Before telling himself that evening was approaching, Emrayin finally decided that it was time for them to drink some water. He realised what it was costing his son to bear his hunger and thirst, keeping himself in hand and not uttering a sound. The death of Mylgun had seemed to blot out

any thought of water for a long time. But thirst was gradually reasserting itself and was now burning with redoubled force, cruelly revenging itself for the involuntary postponement of the torment.

With extreme care, so as not to spill a single drop, he poured some of the putrid water out for Kirisk first. The boy seized the dipper and promptly swallowed his ration like one obsessed. Then Emrayin poured out for himself, discovering as he did so that almost nothing was left of the water. Kirisk realised this too, judging by the tilt of the cask in his father's hand. Emrayin froze, shaken by this, although he had indeed supposed that it was inevitable. He was in no hurry to drink his water now. He thoughtfully held the dipper in his hand, troubled by a sudden thought compared with which the slaking of his thirst was of no importance.

"Here, hold that," he said, handing the dipper to his son, although he shouldn't have done so. To the little boy this was tantamount to torture, to hold a dipper of water and not dare to drink it. With his hands now free, Emrayin firmly pushed the spigot back and returned the almost empty cask to its place.

"Drink up," he invited his son.

"What about you?" asked Kirisk in astonishment.

"I'll have some later. Think no more of it, drink up," said his father calmly.

Without delay, Kirisk swallowed that portion of stinking water too. His thirst was not slaked, as he would have liked, but he still had a slight sense of relief.

"Well, how's that?" asked his father.

"A bit better," whispered the boy gratefully.

"Don't be afraid. And remember, a man can hold out for two or three days even without a drop of water in his mouth. And whatever happens, don't be afraid..."

"Is that why you didn't drink?" interrupted Kirisk. Emrayin was caught unawares by this question.

"Yes," he said briefly. "How long can we last without food? We haven't eaten anything for a long time."

"As long as there's water. But don't you think about it. Let's row on a bit instead. I want to have a chat with you."

The oars began creaking, and father and son slowly trailed over the sea through the mist as if they could not have had a chat where they had been before. Emrayin had to pluck up courage. It seemed to him that it would be easier to concentrate that way, to prepare himself for a talk, the mere

thought of which made his blood run cold. He not only rowed himself, he made his son sit at the oars. There was no need for this at all, just as there was no need to go anywhere. The boy wielded with difficulty the sea oars that were far too big for him. He could have coped with one, but he was not yet big enough for two. Moreover, his father felt that the boy had weakened noticeably, as he himself had been weakening hour by hour. It was this that forced the father to hasten events. Time was passing, time was running out.

Kirisk was silent and did not look round, missing strokes as he plied the unwieldy oars. But it was not this that tormented Emrayin. As he looked at his son from behind, at the bowed and, as he now noticed, still childishly frail, defenceless figure, he bit his lips and his heart was flooded with a burning, throbbing pain. But he dared not begin the conversation, although there was no other choice...

Visibility in the depths of the mist was gradually falling, but Emrayin rowed on, thinking hard. There was, indeed, little time left for him. However much he steeled himself, however physically strong he might be, hunger and thirst were quickly getting the better of him, were quickly draining his strength. He must be in time to prepare his son for what he was planning at that moment, he must do it while he himself was in a state to hold on and show will-power.

He understood that he too, after Organ and Mylgun, would have to leave the boat, that it was the only possibility of, if not saving, at least of prolonging his son's life for as long as the little water in the bottom of the cask would allow. He could not tell whether the mist would disperse that night or on the next day, and, indeed, he could not tell what lay ahead for his son, even if the weather should improve sooner or later, or how and in what way, left alone at sea, he could survive and reach land. There was no answer to this. His only hope, and an unlikely one, if not impossible, was that if the sea should open up, Kirisk might meet a big boatload of white people. He knew from rumours that white people sometimes appeared in those waters; they used to sail across the ocean from faraway lands to other faraway lands on business of their own. He had never met them himself, but he had been told about it by the merchants, who know everything on this earth, and some of whom had supposedly themselves sailed on these mountain-high ships of the white people. Only such a miracle--if the weather changed and the routes crossed, and if the white people noticed the tiny hollowed--out kayak in the ocean-only

that gave a glimmering of hope, faint, unlikely, almost impossible, but at least a glimmering.

Emrayin intended to tell his son about this before leaving him. It was also essential to impress it firmly on Kirisk that he should stay in the boat until his last breath while he was still conscious. And if he was fated to die when the water ran out, he should die in the boat and not throw himself into the sea as Organ and Mylgun had been forced to do, and as he, his father, was also going to do. There was no other choice. Cruel destiny must be obeyed... Emrayin shuddered, however, at the thought that an eleven-year-old boy was going to be left alone in the boat all on his own in the world, in the impenetrable mist, on the boundless sea, slowly dying of hunger and thirst. He could not reconcile himself to that; it was far beyond his strength. Then he caught himself thinking that he would not be able to leave his son alone; it would be better if they died together...

It soon became quite dark. Once more the pitch blackness of a misty night at sea held sway. If it was pointless to row somewhere in the daytime through the mist, it was even more senseless at night. The boat rocked gently where it lay. And again there were no signs that the weather would change. The sea was lifeless.

Father and son settled down for the night on the bottom of the boat, huddling close together. Neither of them slept. Tormented by hunger and thirst, each was wondering what lay ahead.

As he lay beside Emrayin, Kirisk was keenly aware how thin and wasted his father had become in the last few days, how his body had shrunk and lost its strength. Only his beard was as stiff and springy as before. Cuddling up to his father, quietly gulping down tears of pity for him, the boy plumbed in that night hitherto unknown feelings of filial devotion. He could not have expressed those feelings in words, they were in his soul, in his blood, in the beating of his heart. He had formerly always been proud that he took after his father; he would imitate him and dreamed of growing up to be like him but now he was beginning to understand this was his own self, his beginning, and he was the continuation of his father. And so he felt as pained and sorry for Emrayin as for himself. He invoked his blue mouse again so that it would bring water for them, for himself and his father.

Little blue mouse, give us water!
Little blue mouse, give us water!

But his father was no longer thinking of water for himself, although every hour he was finding it harder to bear the sufferings of unslaked, ever-growing and already physically intolerable thirst. Everything inside him was on fire, was drying up and shrivelling in an iron, uncontrollable spasm. His head was beginning to buzz. He now understood Mylgun's last agonies. However, that was not what he was thinking about. To think of water, to want to quench his thirst no longer had any meaning for him. And he would have put an end to his inescapable torments long ago if it had not been for his son, if he could have forced himself to leave the boy nestling at his side during that last dark night. Yet, he must leave the boat as soon as possible. There was no hope of rescue for his son, yet he was protecting him for as long as was humanly possible. Emrayin's last conscious act must be the only one that might help to prolong the boy's life. That was the ultimate meaning of all his struggles and hopes as a father. But it was precisely because of his son that he could not bring himself to do so, not daring to abandon him to the whims of fate. Yet to delay, to hold on any longer was also becoming dangerous: his last strength, which he needed to steel himself, was ebbing away.

The father's time was running out...

How was he to explain this to his son in words? How was he to tell the boy that he was leaving him for his own sake?..

The father's time was running out.

"Father!" whispered Kirisk suddenly, as if reading his thoughts, and he clung even tighter to him as he called on his blue mouse.

Little blue mouse, give us water!
Little blue mouse, give us water!

Emrayin gritted his teeth, groaned with grief and dared not say anything. He was mentally saying goodbye to his son and, the longer he did so, the more difficult and the more agonising it was for him to nerve himself for the last step. That night he realised that all his former life had been a forerunner of the present night. That was what he had been born for and that was what he was dying for, to perpetuate

himself in his son with his last strength. He was thinking about this now as he silently bade the boy farewell. Emrayin was making a discovery for himself: all his life he had been the person he was so as to prolong himself in his son to the last breath. And if he had not thought of this earlier, it was only because there had been no reason to do so.

He remembered that there had been occasions before when this thought had flitted through his consciousness like a flash of lightning across the sky. He remembered and understood now what had happened to him once when he, Mylgun and other fellow tribesmen had been felling a great tree in the forest. The tree had started toppling and by pure chance he had happened to be standing where the giant was about to fall, destroying everything in its way.

"Timber!" they had all shouted.

Emrayin had gone numb with shock and it was already too late; crackling, its crown rushing down with a thunderous roar, overthrowing and overturning the sky itself, tearing out a piece of the green forest ceiling, the tree had been falling slowly and inexorably on to him. And at that moment he thought of one thing alone: of Kirisk, at that time a toddler and the only child, since Psulk had not yet been born. In those few seconds left to him on the threshold of unavoidable death, he had thought only that his son was what would live after him. The tree had crashed down near him with a menacing roar, swamping him with a wave of leaves and dust. All had yelled with relief. Emrayin was still alive, safe and sound!

Now, as he remembered this incident, he realised that it was the appearance of a son that had made him what he was and that he had experienced nothing better and more powerful in his life than his paternal feelings. He was grateful to the children and above all to his son, Kirisk. Emrayin wanted to tell the boy about this, but he decided not to alarm him. The boy was in a bad enough way already...

The father's time was running out...

Little blue mouse, give us water!
Little blue mouse, give us water!

The father's time was running out...

There remained two or three precious memories with which it was hard for him to part. He did not want

to go away without thinking about it, although time was already pressing. Now he was saying goodbye to his memories, constantly remembering that it was time to leave the boat...

He had loved his wife from the very beginning. The amazing thing was that, when at sea, he thought the same thoughts that she was thinking at home. It had been like that from the very start. She had known what he was thinking about when he was on a trip, just as he had known her thoughts... This recognition at a distance had been their secret and a source of great happiness and intimacy.

Before Kirisk was born, when the first signs had appeared which might be confirmed or not confirmed, he said at once, on returning to his wife:

"Are you going to have a boy?"

"Hush, the *kinri* will hear you!" she exclaimed in fright, and her eyes filled with happiness. "How did you know?"

"You were thinking about it today. You want one very much."

"And you?"

"I want one very much too."

And so it came about. Their premonition came true. There was no Kirisk then, but he had to appear soon. And that date was gradually approaching. In those days, his wife went about in his old leather breeches that had seen better days and had been patched and repatched many times: As she explained, this was so that his male spirit should be present when he went hunting, otherwise the growth of the new arrival would be stunted. In those days, his wife in those old leather breeches had been the most beautiful and desirable woman in the world.

Wonderful, exciting and joyful were the days when they thought about the one who was to make them mother and father...

It was Kirisk...

He must now part forever with the boy and everything associated with him.

Again, when Kirisk had grown a little, his mother once lost her temper with him and said that she had been much happier before he arrived.

The little boy had been terribly hurt.

"Where was I when I wasn't here?" he asked his father when Emrayin returned from the sea.

That had been funny... He and his wife had laughed silently, with their eyes only. It gave her particular pleasure that Emrayin couldn't find an answer and did not know how to explain to the boy where he had been when he hadn't been there.

His father would now have told him that he was in his father when he didn't exist in the world, that he was in his father's blood, in his loins, from where he had flowed into his mother's womb, to become a repetition of his father and that now, when he himself had disappeared, he would live on in his son, to be perpetuated in his children's children.

Yes, that's what he would have said to his son and he would have been happy to say it before his own death, but now everything was coming to its end. His family was nearing extinction, Kirisk could stay alive for another day or two at the most, but no more, as his father well knew. And for him this was the appalling disaster and misfortune, not that he had to leave the boat for his son's sake...

Emrayin would have liked to impress it on his son that he should think with' gratitude of old Organ and Uncle Mylgun in the time left to him. They no longer existed, they no longer cared whether anyone remembered them or not, but he should think so for his own sake. Even during the moment before death he should think about this for his own sake. One should die thinking of such people.

Then he decided that perhaps his son might guess this anyway...

When Kirisk woke up, he was surprised to find that he had been warmer while asleep than during the previous nights. He was covered with his father's fur jacket. The boy opened his eyes and lifted his head to find that his father wasn't in the boat. He started forward, feeling round the boat, and began screaming in a weird wail to the silent void of the misty sea. And for a long time his wail never ceased, lonely, full of despair and pain. He wept terribly, until he was exhausted, then collapsed on to the bottom of the boat, gasping for breath and beating his head on the bottom. It was his tribute to the ancestors from whom he was descended, it was his love, his grief and his lamentation for them...

The boy lay on the bottom of the boat without lifting his head or opening his eyes. There was nowhere for him to look and nowhere for him to go. Around him lay the same pale

mist, except that the sea was moving hesitantly now, rocking the boat and turning it round and round.

Kirisk wept, tormenting and reproaching himself for having fallen asleep, for had he not done so, he would never have allowed his father to leave, he would have clung to him with his hands and teeth and wouldn't have let go--better that they should perish together, better that they should die of hunger and thirst than that he should be left alone in total and terrifying solitude. As he wept, he cursed and reproached himself for not jumping up and shouting when he had felt the boat shudder and rock from a forceful push in the night. Would he have allowed his father to jump overboard? Wouldn't he have dived after him into the black depths?

Then, shaking all over, he finally dozed off. Shortly afterwards, as if in recompense for his retreat from grief, he succumbed to an attack of thirst again. Even as he dozed, he felt himself wasting away, as if his whole body was drying up. Thirst overwhelmed him, thirst tormented and choked him. Then he crawled blindly to the cask and discovered that the cork spigot was slightly less stiff and was easier to pull out, and the dipper was beside it. He poured himself some water and, without thinking of anything, drank his fill, thus loosening his stuck lips and allaying his throat spasms. He wanted to pour out some more and drink it, but he thought better of it and managed to stop himself. There was enough left for one or two more portions.

Then he sat dismally there and wondered why his father had gone without saying anything. It would have been easier for him to drown with his father than it was now, when loneliness and terror had shackled his arms and legs and when he was so terrified of stepping overboard. He decided that he would do this as soon as he had summoned up the strength...

It was already noon, or perhaps a little later. So it seemed to Kirisk, to judge by the brightening of the mist. That meant that the sun was shining somewhere at zenith. However, the sun's rays had not yet pierced the Great Mist in its great inertia over the ocean. The mist was thinning out and turning as pale-blue as the smoke from dry firewood. Even so, nothing could be seen more than fifty yards away except the dark, heaving water.

There was nowhere to go, and in any case he could not have coped with the oars now. He looked sadly at his father's and uncle's oars, neatly stacked along the sides. The boat was

drifting, moving in an unknown direction through the mist. The boy was beset by loneliness and a soul-chilling, inescapable terror.

Later, towards evening, he again felt intolerably thirsty. His head was reeling with hunger and weakness. He didn't want to move or look to either side. There was nowhere to look and nothing to look at. It had even become an effort to go as far as the cask. He moved a little way on his knees and stopped, exhausted. He realised that he soon wouldn't be able to move at all. He lifted his hand to his face and was horrified: his hand was so thin; it had shrivelled like a dried chipmunk skin. He poured himself more than he should have done this time. The water left was now on the very bottom, enough for one more time, and after that there wouldn't be any more. Not a drop. But he didn't care about anything now. He just felt a raging thirst. The pangs of hunger had dulled and he had a persistent, heavy, nagging pain in his stomach.

He fainted several times, then regained consciousness. Drawn by newly-aroused currents, the boat drifted on through the mist.

At one point, he firmly made up his mind to throw himself overboard. But he hadn't the strength. He struggled to his knees and hung over the side. He just hung there with outstretched arms, but hadn't the strength to push his body out of the boat. Then he became so weak that he did not even try to drink the remains of the water in the cask.

He lay on the bottom of the boat, weeping quietly and calling on his water-carrier mouse:

Little blue mouse, give me water!..

But the little blue mouse did not appear and he only felt even more thirsty. Again he remembered that summer when he had been bathing naked in the stream. He had been seven then, no more. The summer that year had been hot. It had been scorching on the fringe of the forest. They had been berrying. Then they had gone for a swim. His mother and her sister had gone in too. They had not been particularly shy in front of him. They had both undressed and, their thighs gleaming swarthily, pressing their hands to their breasts, they had gone timidly into the stream. And they had shrieked and squealed strangely as they splashed in the water. And when he ran along the stream and jumped from the bank into the

water, they had laughed themselves helpless at him, especially his mother. "Look, look," she had said to her sister. "How like his father he is, the very image!" And they had said something else, whispering naughtily and laughing cheekily... And the water had flowed in a never ending stream, and you could drink your fill and swim in it as much as you liked...

Little blue mouse, give me water!..

He dreamed that he was back at the stream again. And he was bathing naked in it in the hot summer. There he was, running along the bank and jumping into the stream, but he couldn't feel the coolness of the water. It was a kind of elusive, unsubstantial water, or mist. He was bathing in a mist. He felt shivery in such water. And his mother was not laughing, but weeping. "Look, look how like his father he is," she was saying to someone and she was weeping bitterly... The salty tears were streaming down her face...

At night, Kirisk was woken by the rocking and the noise of the waves round the boat. The little boy cried out softly; he could see the stars above him! For the first time in all these days. They were glittering high up in the dark sky, in the gaps between the clouds scudding over the sea. Even the moon showed up several times, quickly diving back into the clouds again.

The boy was staggered--stars, moon, wind, waves--life, movement! And though the mist was still clinging on in patches and, when the boat entered them, everything was plunged into a vague darkness, it never lasted long. The Great Mist was on the move, had come out of its spell, was crawling off the face of the earth, driven by the wind and the waves.

The boy looked. at the stars with tears in his eyes. He hadn't the strength to begin rowing, he did not know how to steer by the stars, or which direction to take, he did not know where he was or what lay ahead

of him, but he was still glad that he could hear the sound of running waves, that a wind had risen and that the boat was riding the waves.

He wept with joy and grief because the world was clear again, because the sea had stirred to life and because, given food and drink of some kind, he could still love this life. But he realised that he would not now be able to get up, that his days were numbered and that he would soon die of thirst.

The boat was moving more and more briskly over the waves. It was following the current, without rudder and without oars. He could already vaguely guess at a horizon over the sea, the spaces of night were opening out more and more clearly, the patches of mist were occurring less and less frequently. The gloom that he ran into was already different, not so dense and oppressive. He could now imagine fantastic creatures silently speeding through the mist. They arose and disappeared spontaneously in the wind, melting and cleaving the mist.

When the moon appeared from behind a cloud, the surface of the sea glittered brightly, then it faded again, and came to life again. The boy looked at the silently shining stars and wondered, "Which of them are guardian stars? Which is the star of Grandad Organ, which is the star of Uncle Mylgun, and which is the star of my father, Emrayin? We haven't seen you all these days. And you stars couldn't see us in the mist. Now I'm alone, and I don't know where I'm going. But I'm not frightened any more, because I can see you all in the sky. Except that I don't know which star belongs to whom. But it's not your fault, it just happened that way. After all, you couldn't see us at sea. The Great Mist hid us. And now I'm alone. And they have swum away, all three have swum away. They loved you very much, stars. They waited a long time, they very much wanted to see you, to find the way to land. Grandad Organ said that the stars would never let me down. He wanted to teach me... But it's not your fault it

happened this way. I shall soon die too. I haven't got any water, and I haven't got any strength left at all, and I don't know where I'm bound... I have a little water left, a very little, I'm going to drink it now, I can't hold out any longer, I haven't the strength. Today I chewed a piece of the bag in which they keep the fish; it's made of sealskin. But I can't hold out any longer, it makes me sick and I'll throw up... Now I'll drink the last of the water. And if we never see one another again, I want to tell you, stars, that Grandad Organ, Uncle Mylgun and my father Emrayin loved you very much... If I'm still here in the morning, I'll say goodbye to you then..."

The boat soon ran into a broad band of mist again. Everything disappeared and visibility fell. But the boat travelled on as before, driven by wind and waves. Kirisk no longer cared. After drinking the remains of the completely bad water, he stayed lying there, by the empty cask, in the stern, in the place where old Organ used to sit. He prepared to die, and the mist was no longer frightening to him. He merely regretted that the stars were no longer in sight and that perhaps he wouldn't be able to say goodbye to them after all... He was feeling worse and worse...

So he lay there, half-delirious, half-asleep, and there was no knowing how much time had passed. Perhaps it was already beyond midnight, perhaps night was nearly over. It was hard to tell. A light gloom was spreading over the sea, like smoke in the wind.

Destiny was kind to him. The boy might have heard and he might not have heard. But he heard. He suddenly heard the whistle of wings passing over his head and something flew low over the boat in the dark. He started, and he was just in time to see that it was a bird, a big, powerful bird with wide flapping wings.

"*Agukuk!*" he shouted. "*Agukuk!*" He managed to follow the flight path of the Arctic owl and to mark the wind direction. The wind was blowing from the port side on to the back of his head, just behind his left ear!

"*Agukuk!*" he shouted after the bird and he was already holding Organ's rudder, steering the boat in the direction in which the bird had flown.

Kirisk strained himself to the utmost; he gripped the steering oar, summoned up all his remaining strength and thought about nothing except the wind and the direction of the bird's flight.

There was no knowing where to and from where the Arctic owl was flying. From island to mainland, or from mainland to some island. But Kirisk had not forgotten what Organ had said: "That bird only flies over the sea in a straight line. It is the strongest of birds, flying at night and through the mist." Now he was following it.

The boat was riding the waves. The wind was steady. The gloom was thinning out and dispersing, and the edges of the sky were already brightening a little. In front, directly ahead of him, on the dense, dark-blue horizon, a radiant star was shining. Kirisk noticed that the star was in a direct line with the point to which he was steering. He guessed that he should keep to it, for that was the way the owl had flown. He did not know the star, but now he kept his eyes on it and remembered the wind with the back of his head, its strength and its direction.

"Hold on, wind, don't go away. I don't know your name, Grandad Organ could have told me that. But be my brother. Don't go away, don't veer right round. You can keep steady for as long as you need. Help me, wind, don't go away. I shall find out your name and shall call you by it. Or would you like me to call you Organ? After my grandad. And you will know me..."

In this way he urged on the following wind, persuading it to keep steady, impressing it with his will and spirit. But he never took his eyes off the guiding star by which he was steering. "I love you, my star," he told it. "You are so high up and far away in front of me. You are the biggest and most beautiful star. Please don't go away, stay where you are, don't fade. I am

heading for you. The *agukuk* flew your way. I don't know where it flew, whether to an island or to land. Even if only an island, let me die there. Don't go away, star, and don't fade. I don't know your name, please don't be angry with me. I haven't had the chance to learn your name. It could have been told to me by my father Emrayin. If you wish, I will call you after my father, I will call you Emrayin. And when you appear in the sky, I shall greet you and whisper your name. But help me, Emrayin, don't go away too soon, don't fade, don't suddenly hide behind a cloud... "

In this way he urged his guiding star. And he also urged the waves. "Waves, now you're driving on my kayak, now you are good. I shall call you Mylguns, don't stray off course. I would use the oars, but I've lost all my strength. You are going where the *agukuk* has gone. You can roll for a long time in any direction you want. You can see that I am sailing by your will. If I stay alive, I shall always know: you go by the wind Organ and the star Emrayin. And I shall tell everybody, the Mylguns at sea are to the good! Help me, Mylgun waves. Don't go away, don't leave me..."

Emrayin shone longer than all the other stars. By dawn, it was the only one on the horizon. At dawn it was still blazing with its powerful, pure light and then gradually faded in the greying air of morning but was visible in the sky for a long time afterwards as a faint white spot.

Morning came. Then the sun rose over the sea. Kirisk was overjoyed and frightened. He was overjoyed to see the sun and was frightened at the immensity of the sea. Shimmering dark blue under the sun, the sea was desolate as far as the eye could see. The boy held convulsively on to the steering oar, trying to navigate from memory and not lose the wind direction. It was exhausting...

He remembered feeling dizzy, and everything swam in front of his eyes...

The boat was moving of its own accord...

The sun had already moved to the other side of the sky when Kirisk recovered consciousness. Pulling himself up and resting his weight on trembling hands, he crawled with difficulty to the stern and stopped dead with closed eyes, waiting for his dizziness to pass off. Then he opened his eyes. The boat was travelling over the waves. And the sea was rippling as before, as far as the eye could see, a million glints on the living, quivering water. Kirisk looked ahead of him, wiped his eyes and was dumbfounded. Piebald Dog was coming straight towards him from behind the dark green swell of the sea. Piebald Dog was running to meet him! Great Piebald Dog!

The shore was already visible on the edge of the sea as a grey-blue hilly strip. But Piebald Dog, with his white ear and his white groin, was soaring higher than all the hills, and it was already possible to see the boiling fringe of eternal surf at the foot of the mountain. He could already hear the voices of the shore seagulls in the air. And above the hill coiled the pale blue smoke of a signal beacon as it died down on the slope...

Piebald Dog, running along the seashore,

I am returning to you alone--
Without Grandad Organ,
Without my father, Emrayin,
Without Uncle Mylgun.
Where are they, just ask me,
But give me a drink of water first...

Kirisk realised that these were the opening words of his name song with which he must live till the end of his days...

The sea boomed and heaved in the dark, charging forward and dashing itself on the crags. The rock-hard earth groaned as it beat off these onslaughts by the sea.

They have been duelling like this ever since Creation--since the day that day first became day and night first became night, and so it shall be, all days and

all nights, as long as earth and water abide in unending time.

All days and all nights...

...Another night had passed...

The wind Organ was roaring over the sea, the Mylgun waves were rolling along and the radiant star Emrayin was glowing on the rim of the brightening horizon.

...Another day was dawning...